

THE HOUSE OF
HORROR

One, two, Freddy's
coming for you!

A close-up of Freddy Kruever, the antagonist from the Nightmare on Elm Street franchise. He is wearing his signature black fedora and a dark suit. His face is a grotesque, yellowish-brown mask with deep wrinkles and a menacing expression. He is holding his right hand forward, showing the iconic bladed glove with sharp, silver blades extending from each finger.

A Nightmare ON ELM STREET

PERCHANCE TO DREAM

A dimly lit hospital room with several beds. The room is bathed in a blue light, creating a cold and eerie atmosphere. The beds are arranged in a row, and the room appears to be a typical institutional setting from the 1980s.

**AN ORIGINAL NOVEL BY NATASHA RHODES
BASED ON CHARACTERS FROM THE MOTION
PICTURE A NIGHTMARE ON ELM STREET
CREATED BY WES CRAVEN**

PROLOGUE

"How blessed are some people, whose lives have no fears, no dreads; to whom sleep is a blessing that comes nightly, and brings nothing but sweet dreams..."

—Bram Stoker, *Dracula*

It was dark in the ward.

It wasn't simply an absence of light. The darkness had a presence all of its own. The kind that lurked under the beds of small children and made grown men scream in the night.

The room was as still as a corpse.

A sudden shriek pierced the blackness, then abruptly cut off. There was a flurry of dull impacts, followed by a yelp of surprise and a wet crunch.

Then all was still.

Jacob shifted his grip on his weapon, warm blood running down his arm.

Bring it on. Let's finish this.

He could feel the evil presence watching him, waiting. It made him feel like a squeamish child, left alone in the dark with a particularly lively daddy-long-legs. Jacob's skin crawled, but he breathed steadily, strongly, channeling his nerves into the pit of his stomach. He'd been waiting for the moment all his life and he'd be damned if he was going to waste it.

Jacob held his breath and closed his eyes, focusing in on the sounds around him.

There—to his left! The soft scrape of leather on stone.

He spun around and lashed out with his broken chair leg, the only weapon he'd been able to grab before the lights had been cut. But the leg whistled through empty air and the force of his wild swing almost overbalanced him.

There was a soft chuckle, made all the more unnerving by the genuine mirth it contained.

"Jacob. He's *behind* you."

He turned his head blindly, trying to pinpoint the source of the sound.

The air moved, and before he could react, his makeshift weapon was smacked from his grip with such force that his hand went numb.

It clattered to the ground, rolled away from him and was still.

Silence.

A bead of sweat trickled down Jacob's jawline, but he forced himself to remain absolutely still.

He didn't need a weapon—yet.

The floor was cold beneath his bare feet and draught whistled through his thin hospital nightgown. Jacob's breath hissed through his teeth as he fought to control his nerves, which screamed at him to run, to get the hell out before it was too late.

But he was stronger than that. Only one thing mattered to him now: revenge.

The attack came suddenly, savagely, without a sound. Jacob yelped and dropped to the ground as something large whizzed over his head and clanged off a metal girder behind him in a spray of sparks, blindingly bright in the darkness. Shielding his eyes, he twisted on the floor and lashed out in the direction of his attacker, but he wasn't quick enough. A blow to his gut caught him off-guard and he flew backward, and slammed into a concrete wall. He crumpled to the floor, coughing and retching. The inside of his head exploded in blue fireworks as a metal-booted heel connected with his skull.

Dazed, Jacob clutched at his head and tried to get to his feet. The darkness shifted and his legs were kicked out from beneath him with such force that he span three hundred and sixty degrees in the air. Jacob saw an explosion of white light as he cracked his head on the cold concrete.

There was a snigger in the darkness.

Son of a bitch!

He could see in the dark! He'd probably bought popcorn for this one.

Jacob lay still a moment, his bruised chest breathing harshly as the unseen presence closed in on him. Blood dripped down his face and

he clenched his teeth, fighting against the wave of dizziness that threatened to engulf him.

As he lay there, the voices in his head started up again:

"Who are you talking to, Jacob?"

"My friend with the funny hand."

"Mommy, why are you crying?"

"Ahahah! Ahahahahahahahah!"

Maniacal laughter rang through his mind, drowning his thoughts, stealing his sanity. Jacob took a deep breath, the laughter building in his head until he could stand it no more. A fury built in his chest, raging like molten hellfire through his body.

Then his eyes snapped open in the darkness.

Enough!

He rose to his feet like a ghost. Before his unseen attacker could touch him, he let fly with a roundhouse kick that connected solidly, sending a jar of pain through him. Hands seized his jacket, but he smacked them away and made a lunge for the broken chair leg, scooped it off the ground and brought it up toward his assailant's face in one lightning move. There was a screech of pain and Jacob felt blood spray across his hand. Dropping the chair leg, he danced back out of reach, fumbling for the door knob. If he could only lure his opponent out into the open, he might stand a fighting chance.

Too late.

Jacob cried out as an invisible force grabbed him and lifted him clean off the ground. The next thing he knew he was flying through the air, tumbling, flailing as he tried to right himself. He crashed into the shuttered window with bone-crunching force and fell to the ground in a storm of broken glass. The blind clattered down with him, filling the room with a wash of ghostly blue lamplight. Small, dark shadows skittered away as the light touched them.

For one moment a figure was revealed: a black silhouette against the broken window.

Then the air moved and he was gone.

Jacob groaned and rolled over, glass crunching beneath him. He took a shaky breath and pushed himself up on his elbow, his flesh

stinging with a multitude of superficial cuts. He tried to get up. Pain stabbed through his leg as his knee buckled.

"Motherfucker!"

"Jacob! That's supposed to be our little secret."

Jacob clenched his fists as the voice in his ear turned to crazed giggles. The voice was low and growling, filled with icy malice. It was as familiar as his own. He'd been hearing it in his head since the day he was born, but, even now, the mere sound of it sent waves of cold loathing through him.

Fighting the pain, Jacob sat up and tried to bend his leg, beads of sweat trickling down his brow. He gave a cry of pain as his bruised knee made itself felt. The laughter in his mind started up again, loud and mocking

Jacob breathed in deeply, centering himself, shutting out the voice. He wished desperately for a knife, a broken bottle, anything he could use to defend himself. A long shard of broken glass gleamed in the moonlight. Jacob plucked it off the floor and weighted it experimentally in his hand, his eyes flicking around the room like a cornered animal. Then he pulled himself to his feet in one quick movement. The pain in his leg was bad, but just lying there would make things far, far worse.

Time to die, *freak*.

Jacob raised the shard of glass and waited, his heart hammering. His face was set, his strong, angular features locked into a mask of determination. Everything was in place. He could win this time.

That sadistic bastard would finally pay...

A sudden pain blazed up his arm. Jacob looked down. In his hand, the edges of the glass were glowing bright orange.

What the?

Craa-aacck! The glass cracked in a sudden, searing heat that came from nowhere, splitting along its length with a sound like needles scraping over a china plate. Reflexively, Jacob dropped it. It hit the ground and melted instantly into a puddle of sticky liquid goo.

"Shit!" Jacob clutched at his singed fingers, then turned slowly to face the shadows at the end of the room. There was something moving in there, forming a deeper patch of blackness inside the

overlapping gray penumbra. Jacob peered closer, then gave a yelp as flames burst out of the window-frame beside him, filling the window like a furnace, cutting off his escape route.

He backed away, willing his voice not to shake. "I'm not afraid of you!"

An echo was his only reply.

Jacob peered through the blue-tinged darkness, his heart thundering. He lifted his fists to cover his face and dropped back into a fighting stance, ready for anything. All his training, all his physical and mental preparation... It had all been for this one moment.

Don't die...

He glanced at his watch. Six minutes left.

Then—a noise in the blackness.

Screeeeeechhh!

Despite himself, Jacob winced. He could bear anything but that noise...

Sccrreeeeeeeeccchhhhhh!

It was the sound of four razor-sharp blades being dragged across metal. Jacob clapped his hands over his ears.

SCRRREEEEEEEECCCHHHHHH!!

The sound was like a diamond drill in his brain. He couldn't stand it.

"Stop it!"

"Ahaha-ahahahahahahaha!"

"I said *stop it!*"

"And I said ahahahaHA!"

Jacob whirled and struck out blindly at the darkness. "Show yourself! What are you? Chickenshit?"

He bent double as a line of fiery pain scorched across his chest. "Aarggh!" It was as though a ghost had slashed at him with a machete. It was only a flesh wound, but the pain was agonizing. Jacob clutched at his chest, glaring murderously around him at the darkness. Then he cried out again as a second wound opened across his belly. Jacob staggered backward, lashing out blindly at the shadows of the night.

Snick! A third cut ripped across his ribs.

Snick! A forth tore open his flank.

Snick! Snick! Snick!

Again and again his unseen attacker slashed at him, driving him back, Jacob powerless to fight him. He managed to catch one blow across his forearm and kicked out as hard as he could. But it landed in empty air. Jacob stumbled, nearly falling. He felt his head start to spin as he lost blood and knew exactly what it meant: he was going to lose this time.

It was all too much. He had to get out of there. Jacob whirled and sprinted toward the door, blocking the pain of his knee from his mind. If he couldn't find something to use as a weapon, he was done for. Two more minutes and he'd have no more blood left. His numb fingers found the doorknob. He wrenched it open and ran out into the corridor.

Outside was even darker than inside, but Jacob didn't care. He flew down the long, dark corridor like a ghost, his bare feet slapping on the cold tiles, not even caring where he was headed or checking to see if he was being followed. It didn't matter. He had to get away, to try to remember the plan.

As Jacob ran, he became aware of a strange noise. His eyes flicked sideways, then widened in alarm. The walls were bulging and warping as though they were alive, distending into big balloon shapes like giant bubblegum. Scary black shapes were visible inside the bubbles, rolling and turning and trying to solidify...

Jacob turned the corner and entered the reception area at full tilt. He slowed slightly, panting, and glared hard at the walls. The balloons were setting into the shape of pipes, as though a vacuum formed in a factory. More pipes sprouted from the wall, racing away down the length of the corridor. Jacob jumped as a steam-valve popped out fully formed, its wheel spinning furiously.

He jumped at a sudden *crump* sound. All the lights came on at once, bathing him in a sickly red glow. Jacob felt a wave of overwhelming *déjà vu* scream through him.

The corridor was turning into a boiler room.

Fear shut down his mind and Jacob started running blindly, desperately. Hot steam hissed out of the newly-spawned pipes,

scorching his legs as he ran. He sprinted faster and faster, his legs blurring in the darkness, desperately trying to outrun the pipes as they popped up all around him.

He had two minutes.

The big green exit sign loomed ahead of him. Jacob sprinted toward it, not even daring to look over his shoulder. He ran across the foyer, grabbed the handle of the metal door that lead to the car park and tugged on it with all his might.

To his immense relief, it swung open with a creak. He was free!

Jacob darted through the door, his heart in his mouth, terror fluttering wildly in his chest. He heaved the door shut behind him, then spun around, ready to run down the hospital steps and out into the cool darkness and safety of the night...

Jacob froze. "No!"

He was back in the ward again. Broken glass from his fight for life littered the floor and flames danced through the broken window, throwing dancing shadows across the blood-spattered walls.

As Jacob spun around and made a frantic grab for the door handle, an arm flashed out of the darkness and clamped around his neck. Jacob nearly jumped out of his skin.

"Ahahahahah-HAH!!"

The arm tightened and Jacob felt himself being dragged backward. Out of reflex, he slammed an elbow back and felt it connect with a solid thump. Heartened, Jacob kicked backward as hard as he could. The sickening stench of burned flesh filled his nostrils, and he felt the scratchy wool of his assailant's clothing pressed tight against his throat, as the arm constricted his windpipe. Jacob gagged, tearing at it. The strength of his attacker was incredible and he felt the world swim in front of his eyes as his air supply was cut off. He kicked and struggled, but, try as he might, he couldn't break free.

On the periphery of his vision, Jacob saw a flash of light reflected off his attacker's glinting weapon—a dirty old leather glove with four deadly blades fixed to the fingers, like six-inch steel claws.

He knew then that it was all over for him.

"Freddy—" Jacob's voice was a croak.

"Say it three times. Go on. I dare ya." The voice broke into sniggers.

Jacob felt the cold edge of one of the blades pressed against his jugular, and grew very still. He swallowed with difficulty. "Freddy, you sick fuck—"

"That's *Mister* Sick Fuck, to you," growled the voice in his ear. "Didn't your daddy teach you any manners?"

"My father is dead. Because of you," Jacob rasped.

"Oooh, scary." Freddy smirked. "Will he come back to haunt me?"

He laughed uproariously, then fanned out his other hand—the one with the knife-glove on it—and brought it up in front of Jacob's face, wriggling his fingers so that the blades caught the light. Jacob saw the reflection of two, evil red eyes staring back at him and clenched his teeth in hatred.

"Go on," said his tormentor. "Call him. Call your dead daddy. See if he comes to save you."

Despite himself, Jacob felt the threat of tears. He shook his head violently and swallowed again. "Go fuck yourself."

Smack! Freddy hit him over the head with his free hand. Jacob winced as one of the knives made a glancing blow across his forehead. A thin line of crimson opened up and two droplets of hot blood slipped out and rolled down his face.

"You better watch your mouth, my boy."

"I'm not your boy!" Jacob almost shouted.

"No? Then what's *this*?" Freddy slashed open the front of Jacob's gown with a flick of his razor glove. Blood-soaked, green cotton fluttered to the ground. Jacob shivered as he felt Freddy's cold steel knives trace over the letters that were revealed there, outlined in raised white scar tissue.

Two letters.

An "F."

And a "K."

Freddy sniggered. "Most kids just get their mom's name tattooed on a bicep. Something inside a bleeding heart, perhaps. Not to say I'm not flattered."

"Go to hell." Jacob's voice was like ice. He wriggled frantically, trying to work himself free of Freddy's death-grip. If he could only get to the door.

"Already tried that. Didn't work out for me." Freddy's lips twisted into a malicious grin. "You, however..."

Jacob froze as he felt the point of one of Freddy's razors pressing against the side of his throat.

"I think it'll suit ya. Just like it suited your dear old pops."

Something snapped inside Jacob's head. Summoning the last of his strength, he gave a shout of defiance and broke free of Freddy's grip. Locking his hand around his assailant's wrist, he ducked beneath his reach and heaved as hard as he could, bringing the knife-glove around to bear. Before Freddy could react, Jacob slammed his entire body against his tormentor's elbow, driving the blades deeply through Freddy's own black heart.

Blood spurted and Freddy gave a screech of pain. Jacob danced back out of reach with a cry of triumph.

Finally. He'd done it.

He'd killed Freddy Krueger!

The world swam and Jacob sank to his knees in relief.

Crraaaaaack-schluuuuup!

Jacob looked up. "Oh, you have got to be kidding me!"

Blood spurted and bone fragments flew. Then Freddy was standing there, hands hanging downward, panting lightly and grinning in that hideous way of his. Fresh gore ran down his blades, pooling on the white tiling of the floor. He had pulled the knife out of his own heart as though it were nothing more than a troublesome splinter.

Jacob leapt up and stumbled backward, preparing to fight for his life. His body seemed to be getting heavier by the second and he felt all the willpower drain out of him as he gazed into Freddy's evil red eyes, into the depths of his bitter, twisted soul.

"Jacob..." Freddy's voice was sing-song. He held up a finger and slowly wagged it back and forth in front of his face.

On Jacob's wrist, the second hand of his watch began the final countdown.

Three...

Two...

One...

"Wake up and smell the coffee!"

As Jacob's wristwatch alarm went off, Freddy brought his glove-hand around in a powerful, compact arc. Jacob closed his eyes as the center blade whizzed down toward his head, burying itself deeply...

In the light switch beside him.

A blast of blinding luminescence stabbed down from overhead, as all the lights in the room came on. Jacob cried out, threw his arms up to protect his eyes and cowered back against the wall. He was vaguely aware of voices and the sounds of running, then somebody screamed.

It wasn't him. The screaming went on and on, until Jacob dared to peek out from behind his hands, squinting painfully against the light.

His jaw dropped. He was still in the ward, but things were different. He picked out the nightmarish scene in ugly florescent light.

The ward was trashed. Every bit of furniture was overturned and what wasn't broken was on fire. Flames crackled, and deep diagonal knife-slashes ran the length and breadth of the room. The eight metal-framed beds that lined the ward were empty.

Blood was everywhere. Pooled on the floor. Splattered on the walls. Dripping from the goddamned ceiling. How the hell had blood got onto the ceiling?

Freddy was gone and in his place a group of pale-faced kids huddled, staring at him in horror. One of the girls was screaming, clinging to her friend in terror.

Utterly confused, Jacob took a step toward her, holding out his hands to quiet her down.

Then he saw the bodies. There were four of them.

Slashed.

Gutted.

Hacked to death, floating in their own individual pools of blood, sprawled in obscene postures on the floor and across the beds.

Young teens, no more than fifteen or sixteen.

With the icy clarity of shock, Jacob saw that the arms and hands of the corpses were covered in dozens of cuts and slashes, as though they had tried to defend themselves.

A screaming dread rose up inside him. Jacob slowly looked down at his own hands. They were coated in blood up to the elbow. He was clutching a broken pill bottle in one white-knuckled hand.

The world spun around him. Jacob dropped the bottle as though it had stung him and backed away, holding his hands out as though to ward off invisible demons.

This couldn't be real, it could *not* be.

He had to wake up.

The alarm on his wristwatch was still ringing. He tried to shut it off with fumbling, blood-slicked fingers, but it wouldn't stop. He gave a shout of fear and smashed it against the wall, making the huddled kids jump and clutch at one another in panic. A deathly hush fell over the room, broken only by one girl's terrified sobbing.

"Freddy?" Jacob's voice came out as a pleading croak.

"Jacob—try to stay calm. We're not going to hurt you."

Bewildered, he spun around to face the doorway. A white-jacketed doctor was standing there, one finger frozen on the light switch. His face was as pale as sheet and he looked like he was about to throw up. The ward door was hanging off its hinges, and behind him, the open doorway was filled with uniformed guards. They all had guns, pointed right at him. Jacob swallowed as he heard the distinct click of a safety catch.

"Freddy!" Jacob's voice was almost a shout. He looked around him wildly. The walls seemed to press inwards and a wave of prickly cold nausea crashed over him. This was real. A tremor passed through him and his teeth started chattering.

This couldn't be happening. It could *not* be happening. It couldn't be—

"Take it easy Jacob. I'm going to come in now. Just stay where you are and everything'll be all right."

"I didn't I wasn't... It was *him*, dammit, he was here!"

"Of course he was." The doctor's voice was so calm, Jacob wanted to slap him.

"I killed him! But he wouldn't die. He was trying to kill me!"

"It's all right Jacob. He's gone now."

"Don't patronize me!" Jacob shouted. "He's not gone! He's still here! I brought him here, and now he's going to kill me. He'll kill us all!"

He saw the doctor exchange worried looks with the guards. One of them muttered something into a radio transmitter and motioned to the doctor, who stepped gingerly into the room, all the while keeping Jacob in plain view.

"Stay where you are!" shouted Jacob, desperation filling his voice.

"Jacob, it's okay..."

"Stop saying my name!" He ran a bloody hand through his hair, fighting madness. "I know what you're trying to do. You say my name a lot, you make me feel like I can trust you, right? I read all about that shit." Jacob gave a snort of laughter that ended with a sob of grief. "Just go ahead and shoot me doc, I ain't going nowhere."

"We're not going to shoot you, Jacob," said the doctor, but no sooner had the words left his mouth when there was the *thunk-whiirrrrr* of a dart fired from a trunk gun. Jacob felt its stinging barb enter his neck, pumping out industrial-strength tranquillizer into his raging bloodstream. A moment later, he pitched forward and fell face down onto the ground, a look of despair on his face. As he passed out, Jacob fancied he could hear faint laughter, ringing long and loud through his head.

Then everything faded to black.

Dr Anderson wiped his forehead with a sleeve and walked cautiously toward the prone body of Jacob. In the corner, the kids were watching him, shaking, wide-eyed. The doctor tried to contain his emotions with professional detachment. First things first. He had to get them out of there and to the trauma center ASAP, to give them

an individual debriefing before they started talking to one another. Contain the situation before any further harm was done.

The last thing he wanted was for news of what had happened to spread.

Not after last time.

In the corner, the blonde girl, a long-term patient named Kate O'Mally, wiped away her tears, blinked and turned to her friend.

"Who's Freddy?" she asked.

ONE

8.15pm and it was hell on the freeway.

Dr Sally Spencer settled back into the passenger seat of her custom-built SUV and tried to relax. Four lanes of tailbacks stretched as far as the eye could see across the desert plain, from the dark mountains in the east to the horizon in the west. Although it was late at night, the temperature was still up in the eighties, the suffocating heat causing the road ahead of her to shimmer and sway like a twisted black snake. The illusion was compounded by the winking reflections on the cars ahead, flashing and sparkling like scales on the creature's back.

Something very Freudian about that image, thought Dr Spencer, mopping her forehead with a sleeve. She gave the ghost of a smile, which vanished quickly as she leaned forward to adjust the air conditioning. The lever was stuck, but she freed it with a thump and cranked it up as far as it would go, sending a blast of cool air hissing through the car for all of five seconds before it cut out.

"Son of a *bitch*!"

Dr Spencer kicked at the seat rest in front of her, then closed her eyes and tried to think happy thoughts. A frown crept across her brow and a moment later she reopened her eyes. She had no happy thoughts. There was just her, this deathtrap on wheels and a hundred miles of crappy desert road to cover. In fact, if it wasn't for the contents of the box on the back seat, this entire trip would have been a waste of time.

There was a rustle from the seat beside her, then a voice muttered, "You know, if you'd just quit stressing—"

"You want me to quit stressing? Then get out of this car, walk up to whoever's causing this tailback, kick him in the balls, get me a cheeseburger from—that McDonalds out on the horizon and get back to the goddamn car."

"With or without pickles?"

"With. And hold the attitude."

"You're the boss." In the driver's seat, Mitchell touched the peak of his leather cap and chuckled under his breath. He had long since given up arguing with Sally when she was stressed. He knew from hard experience that the only way he could get her to do something was to make her decide to do it herself.

Mitchell lit a cigarette and glanced over at her, took in her upright posture and the slight jut of her chin, and shook his head ruefully. Hopefully the traffic would ease once they hit the next intersection, or the girl just might spontaneously combust. After the day he'd just had, the last thing he wanted to do was to spend hours cleaning a psychiatrist's guts from the upholstery.

Dr Spencer drummed her fingers moodily on the dashboard, chewing on the end of her pen while she re-read the report balanced on top of her briefcase. The heat was making her sleepy, but she was too wired to nap. Her eyes closed for a second, then snapped open again as a thought crossed her mind. She opened her mouth to speak.

"Yeah, there really are no cookies left," said Mitchell, without taking his eyes off the road. "You ate the last one twenty-five miles ago."

"Damn!" She sighed in exasperation and flopped back in her seat, deflated. "Are you sure?"

"Positive. But you can lick the wrapper if it'll help you."

Sally flashed him a tight smile. "I'll pass, thanks."

Mitchell gazed thoughtfully through the windshield. "Does spending time with me bother you?"

The question was casual enough, but it was a good five seconds before Sally spoke again. She glanced across at Mitchell, taking in his half-smile and the glint in his gray eyes, and felt a bolt of anger go through her. What gave him the right to do this? Sure, he was cute. And smart, too. But she didn't pay him to be either cute or smart. She paid him to drive.

And driving was all she was interested in.

For now.

Sally tossed her long auburn hair and returned his oh-so-innocent look. "Of course not. We're both adults. Hey, gimme a run down on

that patient. There's got to be something of use in that file."

Mitchell just smiled, his gray eyes crinkling in amusement.

"What?"

"You're stalling. Redirecting the question like that? It's classic avoidance technique. You of all people should know that."

"Is that your honest assessment, doctor?"

"Spare me the sarcasm. You know I don't want to talk about that patient. You got anything else you'd care to discuss? 'Cos we've already talked about the weather, my mother, your passive-aggressive issues, my dog's hernia operation and your oral fixation."

"And?"

"And I've finally brought up an issue that's passably interesting, and you avoided the question. Mitchell smiled winningly. "Surely, now's a terrible time to talk about the patient."

"I don't think that—" Sally broke off. "My oral *what?*"

"Fixation, yeah." Mitchell blew a plume of smoke out the window. "I've been meaning to bring that up. Whenever you're stressed you stick something in your mouth. It's so textbook I can't believe you don't notice it."

Sally slowly pulled the pen out of her mouth and turned her gaze on him, holding eye contact just long enough to make him squirm.

"And?"

"And nothing," Mitchell said carelessly, revving the engine. "Just thought I'd mention it."

Sally shot a smile that quickly faded. "Hey. Does that engine sound rough to you?"

"And she's changing the subject again."

"I know. But listen." Sally frowned. "It sounds funny, don't you think?"

"We've been sitting in this jam for hours. She's probably overheating in this weather. All this stop-start, stop-startin' ain't helping her much." Mitchell reached out and patted the dashboard fondly. "Poor old girl. She does her best, you know, but she's not as young as she used to be."

"I know how she feels. I mean, how it feels." Sally pulled a face at Mitchell and rubbed at her aching limbs. She sat up straighter in her

seat, trying to stretch her back. The starched suit she was wearing might have been appropriate for work a couple of hours ago, but now it was driving her crazy. Her close-fitted pants were uncomfortably tight sitting down, and her shirt kept sticking to her sweat-slicked back.

She reached around and irritably pulled it away from her skin wishing heartily for a long, cool shower and a change of clothes. There was no beating this humidity and the car was like an oven. "Might be best to pull over at the next rest stop. Don't want her conking out on us in the middle of this jam. This heat is a bitch."

Mitchell shrugged. "It's up to you. But I say we keep going if we're going to get back before midnight. Silverman's gonna have a fit if he's not the absolute first person to see this shit."

Sally nodded unconsciously, glancing back almost guiltily at the A4-sized box file on the rear seat. It sat there snugly, nestled in a fold of her discarded leather jacket, the top sealed with heavy-duty steel gaffer tape. It almost seemed to be a lurking, living presence.

Sally felt a wave of goosebumps wash over her and shivered despite the heat. Just looking at that thing gave her the creeps. She didn't even dare to think about its contents. She picked up the case file from the seat pocket and fanned herself with it, a contemplative look on her face.

"Mitchell?"

"Hmmm?"

"That kid—what happened back there—it could've been prevented, right?"

"I'm not saying a word. You know what I think." Mitchell's voice was flat, but Sally picked up a warning undertone. "Don't you?"

Sally shrugged, not trusting herself to answer. Mitchell was one stubborn son of a bitch. In all the years they'd been working together she hadn't once seen him go back on an opinion, which, as others had pointed out, pretty much made them suited to one another.

But this last case was an unusual one. She'd never seen anything like it, which was why she'd called in Mitch. But if anything, his

presence had done nothing but distract her and now they were leaving without the answers they'd gone searching for.

It pissed her off. Big time.

She wiped at her neck with the flat of her hand, then leaned forward and fiddled with the air conditioning again. "Damn this heat! What's wrong with the air con?"

Mitchell just shrugged.

Sighing, Sally twisted the dial all the way up. Nothing. She stared at it in disgust, then sat back and tried to crank open the window. The handle wouldn't budge. She blew a droplet of sweat off the end of her nose. It was getting uncomfortably hot and her temper was threatening to blow a fuse. "Hey, Mitchell, could you open your window? I'm dying in here."

No reply.

Sally ran a hand through her sweat-soaked hair. "Hey, look. I'm sorry. Okay? It's been a long day. This heat is making me cranky." She heaved on the window lever, putting her full weight on it, the automatic open/close control refusing to work. She gave a cry of pain as the plastic lever snapped off in her hand, gashing her palm. Thick blood welled out, dripping down onto the knee of her expensive suit.

"Shit!" Sally clutched at her hand, trying to stem the flow of blood. "Oh, that's just great. Now the car hates me too."

Mitchell didn't so much as glance around. Sally bristled. "Hello? Bleeding here—any chance of some sympathy? Or a tissue?"

The car hit a bump, jarring her.

"Mitchell?"

The silence was deafening.

"Hey, superhero," Sally reached out to tap Mitchell on the shoulder. Then she was thrown sideways as Mitchell suddenly twisted the wheel and hit the gas, jolting the car out of the line of traffic onto the roadside.

"What the?" Sally struggled in her seat, fighting to sit upright as the car made a high-speed U-turn on the bumpy desert siding, then headed back the way it had come. It accelerated down the roadside, throwing up a cloud of dust and gravel in its wake. Horns blared behind them as angry drivers protested. "Mitchell?"

Mitchell changed up a gear, making the overheated engine whine. The car lurched as it bumped over the concrete studs at the side of the road, then continued to accelerate, one wheel on the road, one on the earthy track beside the road.

Sally grabbed hold of the jacket hook above her and hauled herself upright, smearing the doorframe with blood. The car bounced again and she cracked her head painfully on the door post, nearly falling forward. She swore and braced herself against the seat, then turned to Mitchell in a fury. "Hey! What's wrong with you? You wanna get us arrested? Stop this car right *now*!"

Clunk! Sally jumped as the automatic door locks clamped down, locking all four doors tightly. She stared stupidly at the door, then reached out and tried to pull up the lock. It was stuck down.

She tugged harder, then gave a yelp as the knob suddenly melted beneath her fingers, the molten plastic sticking like hot toffee. She ripped them away in pain and shook her hand around wildly, then turned and glared at Mitchell. "The bastard door's melting! Stop the car!"

If Mitchell heard her, he gave no indication of it.

"I said stop the car, or I'll have your ass up in front of the board so quick it'll make your head spin!"

No reply.

"I'm not kidding, buster!" Sally put out a hand to shake Mitchell, then jumped back as he whipped round to face her. But wasn't Mitchell at all.

This was a monster.

Sally stared at it in shock.

The monster laughed, revealing a set of yellowed, cracked teeth. It was a man—or it had once been man—but its face was hideously burned, the skin covering its mean, pinched features twisted and warped, like the head of a cheap plastic doll thrown into the fire. The monster's eyes were gleaming and bright with malice, and it wore a striped red and green sweater that would have looked almost cheerful, had it not been full of burn marks and bloody holes.

Sally's eyes traveled further down the monster's body. With a stab of terror she saw that it was clutching a fistful of knives in one hand,

fixed to the thick leather gloves it wore like some sick, acid-inspired Halloween costume.

Whatever it was, Sally was freaked the fuck out.

She watched in uncomprehending terror as the creature reached beneath the seat and pulled out a battered old fedora, which he stuck on his head and tilted at a jaunty angle.

He glanced over at Sally and winked, then slammed the accelerator down.

She was thrown back in her seat by the sudden force as the car raced down the side of the tailback, gaining speed at an incredible rate. The car's steel chassis vibrated as the wheels spun in the desert earth, making the seats rattle alarmingly.

A hallucination. It had to be a hallucination.

Sally hung onto her seat belt for dear life, staring at the creature in the seat beside her in shock.

Too much sun—not enough sleep—that'd do it.

A strange sensation made her look down.

Right. Definitely dreaming.

She was naked save her underwear, which had somehow been turned into a pink Day-Glo bra and a pair of cheap crotchless panties. Sally hurriedly grabbed for her briefcase to cover herself up. Boy, was Mitchell going to have a field day analyzing this one!

In the driver's seat beside her, the monster turned its head and gave her a look of lecherous appreciation.

Then he reached out for her, his deadly blades aiming right for her belly.

Unable to contain herself, Sally screamed and cowered down in her seat. The monster merely took hold of the air conditioning switch beside her and started to turn it. Static electricity crackled in the car and a blast of hot air poured out of the air vents, making her field notes fly around the interior like angry birds.

The monster started chuckling to itself. Sally looked down at the air conditioning unit. There was a cartoon-style red dial in the center of it, with three settings, labeled "HOT," "HOTTER" and "YOU GOTTA BE KIDDING ME!" The lever was pointing to the first setting.

Sally blinked.

Okay, she thought. Think logically. This is a dream. I have to wake up.

Sally knew that, but at the same time, she felt a terror rising inside her like nothing she'd ever felt before. The monster sitting beside her was pure evil. She could feel it in her bones. She knew instinctively that, if she didn't get away from it, this nightmare might just become a reality.

She tugged on the door handle and watched in disbelief as it too came off in her hand, melting instantly into a dissolved plastic mess. A second later, the side of the car slumped downward with a rich burping sound, the plastic and metal lining of its interior turning to liquid to create one smooth, flat, shining surface. The window vanished beneath the tide, plunging the car into semi-darkness.

Sally clawed at it in vain.

She was trapped.

The monster laughed and hit the gas once more.

Sally opened her mouth to yell at the monster, then felt something warm trickle across the top of her bare foot. She glanced downward and recoiled. Blood was pouring through the gap between the seats. Sally's eyes flicked instinctively to the rearview mirror. Her eyes widened. The box file on the back seat was open, blood spraying from the top and coating the roof, windows and sides of the car.

Oh, this *cannot* be good.

The creature's cackling heightened as it threw the a/c handle to the second setting. Sally sniffed. There was a strange smell in the car-like something was burning.

She glanced down. Her underwear was smoking. Sally realized that the burning smell was coming from her.

The monster was frying her alive.

Panting, Sally flung herself at the air conditioning switch, then recoiled as the lever morphed into a hissing snake right in front of her eyes. The snake snapped at her, then coiled itself up sedately, watching her with dark amber eyes.

As the car sped up, the heat inside it increased. Sally peeled herself away from the vinyl seat and peered at the speedometer. She gasped

as the speed hit ninety, a hundred, a hundred and ten...

She couldn't take much more. It was too hot. Monster or no monster, she had to get out of there, or she was going to pass out. Sweat poured down Sally's face and she panted groggily.

Could she have blacked out from a hallucination?

A moment later Sally cried out in pain as the synthetic nylon in her underwear started to melt, flash-searing itself to her skin. She started ripping at her underwear, but it had already melted into her flesh.

"Okay. You let me out of here right now!" Sally kicked futilely at the door, then grabbed her briefcase and tried to hurl it through the front windshield, desperate for air.

There was a flash of steel and her briefcase fell back into the car in five pieces.

Sally gaped.

Beside her, the creature winked, then reached out for the air conditioning unit again.

"No!"

Sally watched helplessly as the monster grasped the lever. His eyes flicked up to hers and a cruel smile spread across his face. Before she could move a muscle to stop him, he jacked the lever all the way into the red.

Instantly, the skies around the car flickered and turned a deep red, like the landscapes of Mars. Alarm bells and claxons sounded, earsplittingly loud inside the confines of the car.

Whumph! Sally screamed as a shock-wave of heat poured out of the vents and hit her like a body blow. Instantly, the flesh on her hands started to wither and crack, smoke pouring from her skin. She felt something scorch the back of her head and realized with a shock that her hair was on fire. She opened her mouth to cry out, then started choking as smoke plumed out of her throat, enveloping her in a black cloud.

The monster threw back his head as a wall of flames enveloped him, cackling in delight. "*Now we're cooking!*"

Sally screamed and screamed...

And woke up with a gasp.

For a second she stared around in panic, with quick, jerky movements of her head.

She was still in the car. Bright sunlight shone across the dashboard, bouncing up into her eyes. A pink fluffy Garfield doll dangled from the mirror. Beside her, Mitchell held the wheel steadily, gazing calmly off into the distance. The tailback seemed to have cleared and they were on the move again, driving down the long, straight stretch of highway toward the mountains. Ahead of them, a bored child pulled faces at her from the safety of his parents' Range Rover.

Everything was perfectly normal.

"Fuck!" Sally raised a shaking hand to push her sweat-drenched hair off her forehead, feeling an overwhelming flood of relief sweep through her. Her heart thundered in her chest and the skin on her face was tingling. Sally raised a hand to touch it, and realized that she had dozed off and sunburned herself in her sleep. She pulled down the sun visor and checked herself out in the mirror. There was a definite red glow across her forehead and right cheek.

Damn.

Sally shook her head, smiling at herself ruefully. What a putz. It was going to take a heck of a lot of concealer to cover that mess up. Still, at least she'd woken up before it got too bad. The last thing she wanted to do was to go to next weekend's big convention looking like a lobster.

She giggled to herself to get some of the tension out of her system—a touch of hysteria in there, perhaps?—then snapped the visor back up and settled down in her seat. That was the great thing about dreams, right? They warned you about all the shit that went on while you slept, so you'd wake up if you were in any kind of real danger. Even if that danger was just sunburn.

The mind was truly a wonderful thing.

Sally sucked in a breath and gave a wan smile. "Oh my god, that was awful." She turned to Mitchell, who was now gazing out through

the side window. "Hey, Mitch, you'll never believe this dream I just had. It was *seriously* screwed u—"

Blam!

Sally jumped as something dark crashed into the windshield.

It was a bird and it was on fire.

Sally watched in disbelief as it slowly slid down the windshield, leaving a trail of crystallized orange blood and feathers. It finished up in a sad little heap on the bonnet, blazing away merrily like a miniature bonfire. The flames whipped this way and that in the wind, shedding feathers by the dozen.

"Er, Mitchell..." Sally slowly raised a finger and pointed. "Someone torched Big Bird."

She peered at it more closely, then frowned. Whoever had set fire to the poor creature had also seen fit to spray-paint its feathers.

Red and green, of all colors.

"What on earth?" Sally narrowed her eyes and glared at the kid in the car in front. Had he done this? She wouldn't put it past the little brat. There was something seriously wrong with kids these days. In fact, her entire vocation depended on it.

The car lurched and Sally glanced over at Mitchell in concern. He was still peering out of the side window. Sally frowned, wishing he'd pay more attention to the road. Knowing him, he'd probably just seen some biker's broad flash her tits three miles back and was hoping for a re-run.

Her mouth quirked upwards and she reached over to shake him. "Come on, doofus, it's just a bird. Stay focused. We've got a lot of driving to do before—"

Mitchell slumped forward heavily onto the steering wheel.

Sally stared at him, then grabbed him by the shoulders and hauled him upright. "Mitchell? What's wrong with—sweet mother of *God!*"

She recoiled in horror, clapping a hand over her mouth.

Mitchell's handsome face was blackened and burned on one side, as though someone had taken a blowtorch to him. His skin had peeled off and the underlying flesh was visible, gleaming shockingly in the dim light. His cap fell off as he lolled back in his seat and Sally

saw that all his hair on the left side of his head was gone, burned clean off his scalp.

She fought down the urge to throw up.

Mitchell was dead.

She'd only fallen asleep for a moment.

Then the answer hit her. She had to be still dreaming. Had to be...

The car bumped as it started drifting off the road, the wheel locked over to one side. Dazed, Sally grabbed at it convulsively, steering it back, then fearfully looked back at Mitchell. She smelt the stench of burning flesh and tasted bile in her mouth, and realized that this was no dream.

Mitchell really was dead.

There was a sudden blare of sirens, and a whirling red light filled the inside of the car. Sally nearly jumped out of her skin as two police motorcycles pulled alongside her, gesturing sharply for her to pull over. She realized they must have been drifting across the road like this for quite a while.

Catching the cop's eye, she frantically pointed at Mitchell, then drew her finger sharply across her throat. Getting the message, the policeman on her right pulled out his walkie-talkie and spoke rapidly into it, then dropped back to join the police car behind them.

Sally tightened her grip on the wheel and tried to turn it slightly to correct their path, but the wheel was locked straight, fused by the heat. Sally glanced into the rearview mirror and saw with a stab of disbelief that there was a long streak of burning rubber marking her path down the highway behind her. She caught a whiff of smoke and realized what it meant.

The SUV was on fire.

Up ahead, a bend in the road loomed.

Okay, get a grip.

Sally breathed in deeply, trying not to panic. She had to stop the car, and quickly, but first, she had to move Mitchell.

Grimacing, she scooted across the seat and grabbed a fistful of Mitchell's charred shirt. It disintegrated in her hands, revealing a glimpse of his burnt skin beneath. The smell of charred meat made Sally retch, but she carried on regardless, unfastening his seatbelt

and heaving his burnt corpse to one side as hard as she could. As she did so Mitchell's head fell forward again, bouncing off the side window. From that angle, he looked normal but for one gray eye staring sightlessly ahead.

He'd had such pretty eyes.

Tears blurred Sally's vision. She quickly lifted her leg over the gearshift and tried to kick his foot away from the accelerator. Then she put her booted heel onto the brake and pushed down. It seemed to be stuck, so she pushed harder, gingerly resting a hand on Mitchell's chest for support...

Mitchell gasped suddenly. His burnt hand locked down on her arm like a clamp and Sally nearly had a heart attack. She leaped backward as though she'd been thrown, then screamed bloody murder as Mitchell's hand tightened around her wrist and drew her back in close to him.

Sally shrieked and started slapping at him mindlessly. It was like something out of a nightmare. He couldn't be still alive. Not looking like that.

"Sally..."

"Mitchell? Oh my God—"

Mitchell's cracked lips moved silently, as though he were reciting mass to an invisible audience. A wisp of smoke drifted out of his nostrils.

Fighting down her revulsion, Sally reached out with her free hand to tentatively touch him on the shoulder. "Uhhh—okay. Try not to move. We'll get you to a hospital."

Mitchell suddenly snapped upright in his seat. He blinked, then his lips twisted into a hideous grin. He pulled Sally in closer, ignoring her expression of frozen horror. "Hey doll, don't sweat it. Lemme make it up to you." He leaned in close, his lips parting. With a flash of horror, Sally saw that he was going to kiss her.

She had imagined this moment taking place many times, but this wasn't the way she'd pictured it. This wasn't it at all.

She shrieked and kicked at Mitchell, then, in a burst of clear-headedness, made a grab under the dashboard for her briefcase. She brought it around in a tight swing, catching Mitchell a resounding

crack on the side of the head. She did it again, harder, and he finally let go of her. Fire burst from the cracks in his skin and quickly spread, racing up his body until he was completely enveloped in flame.

Then he lolled forward and was still.

A police cruiser pulled alongside, siren wailing, blaring its horn frantically. Sally tore her eyes away from the steaming corpse of her partner and saw with a yelp that they were almost upon the bend in the road...

In a panic she grabbed the wheel and heaved on it with all her might, but she was too late. The SUV plunged off the road, trailing fire as it nosedived down the steep incline of a scrub-covered bank. Sally yelled and made a grab for her seatbelt, then braced herself against the inside of the car as the SUV headed unstoppably toward a giant wooden signpost.

She was thrown forward as the car hit the sign and slammed her head hard against the dashboard. With a low groan, the sign pitched forward and fell with an air of finality across the car.

Sally prized her bleeding head off the steering wheel, and blinked muzzily at the sign that had just landed on the hood.

The sign read, "WELCOME TO SPRINGWOOD."

Then everything faded to black.

TWO

It was 1.45pm and the darkened classroom was quiet, save for the sounds of heavy breathing and the occasional clatter of something being knocked over. The sweet scent of oranges drifted over from the freshly-picked bunch in the vase on top of the radiator. In the corner, an ancient grandfather clock ticked, counting down the minutes till the end of lunch break.

Ella Harris gasped and gripped the side of the desk, as strong hands ran up over her bare belly, pausing to play briefly with the silver ring that pierced her belly button. She glanced quickly toward the door, then pressed her face into her partner's shoulder, peeling back his T-shirt to reveal his tanned, toned flesh beneath. The light from the half-open blinds striped it with bars of white, plunging the rest into shadow. She flicked her tongue briefly across his skin, then tangled her fingers in his hair—black, tousled hair, smelling faintly of some fragrant, fruity shampoo—and pulled his head back, gazing up into his dark eyes as though searching for answers that she knew he didn't have.

Dimitri met her gaze steadily, then grinned and gave a slight shake of his head. Ella bit her lip, trying not to smile. He was a handsome devil, no denying it and the knowledge that he was hers sent a delicious shiver running through her. But still, they really, really shouldn't have been doing this. It was wrong in so many ways that Ella didn't even know where to begin.

Fuck it.

Ella closed her eyes, turning her face up to his for a long, cool kiss. He tasted like spearmint breath drops, with the faint tang of cinnamon gum underneath. She kissed him again, harder, then pulled back to check his reaction, licking her lips impishly

"Worth the wait?"

"You tell me."

Ella couldn't stop grinning. She glanced again toward the door, but all was quiet in the corridor outside. Then she turned back to

Dimitri, letting her gaze drift down over him slowly, while he stood and watched her in silence.

And there was a lot to look at. Long, graceful limbs, clothed in blue denim and black cotton. Tight Rockstar T-shirt that did nothing to hide the powerful, symmetrical lines of his figure. Eyes so brown they were almost black, dark as the twisting, sinuous tribal tattoo that wound its way around one bicep, vanishing under his tee and reappearing at the base of his neck. Everything about him screamed *danger*, from the startlingly pale knife-scars on his forearm to the glint in his eyes as he looked at her sideways, curling one corner of his mouth up into a smirk.

He knew his smile always got to her. She saw a spark of arousal flash across his face as he studied her, watching, waiting.

Ella watched him too, her ruby lips parting in a teasing smile. She loved to look at him and there was nothing wrong with that. Nothing wrong at all. A look wouldn't do any harm. Nobody could blame her for looking. You couldn't prove a look in court, or present it as evidence.

Trouble was, sometimes just a look wasn't enough...

Ella blew a strand of her long, honey colored hair out of her eyes and licked her lips slowly, teasingly. Then she stepped smoothly up to Dimitri and ran her hand across his broad chest. She felt his heart beating, pounding like a bass drum beneath the taut softness of his skin and something inside her leapt with a fierce pride. He felt the same way about her as she did about him—she'd always known it, but to have him here, like this, was the ultimate proof.

They fell on each other hungrily, hands tearing at one another's clothing. Ella pushed her tongue inside Dimitri's mouth, kissing him passionately, then ran her hands down the length of his body and tugged at his belt. Dimitri growled into her mouth and tried to push her away, but she pushed him back, knocking him a little off balance as her fingers went back to his belt.

"What if somebody comes?" Dimitri's voice was a breathy whisper in her ear.

Ella smiled. "Then we'll just have to wait a couple minutes before we go again."

Dimitri laughed out loud, then gripped her hips and lifted her up on top of the wooden desk. All those years of basketball training were evident in the steely strength of his arms and Ella ran her fingers over his deliciously firm biceps before turning her attentions to his shirt, unbuttoning it to the waist. Catching her breath, she ripped it the rest of the way, unable to wait. Buttons clattered to the ground like rain.

"Hey!"

"Forget it. Tell your mom you got attacked by wild cheerleaders. Stranger things have happened."

"Cheerleaders?" Dimitri lifted his face from Ella's neck and gave her a quizzical look. "Not jealous, are we?"

"Who, me? Jealous? Never," Ella lied, then leaned in close to run her tongue along Dimitri's collarbone. "She wants you back, she can shove those pom-poms up her—hey!" She ducked as Dimitri batted at her playfully, then lifted her head and trailed some kisses down his jaw line, moving down his tattooed neck, flicking her tongue against the hollow of his throat.

God, he was just so damn...

"Ella?"

"Mmmm?"

Silence.

"Ella!"

"What?"

Silence. Then a chuckle from above her.

"Did you hear a word I just said?"

Ella blinked and looked up. The world seemed to jump. Dimitri vanished and in his place there was suddenly some freaky old guy. His face loomed above her and Ella shrank back, blinking rapidly in confusion. The face was swarthy and weathered with age, but not entirely unkind. A pair of cracked glasses sat askew on a nose reddened by too much booze. One bushy white eyebrow was raised in a silent question.

Ella came back to reality with a nasty bump. "Mr Gibson. Hi. How's it going?"

She sat up straight in her office chair, pushed her hair back and started fumbling with her computer keyboard to cover her embarrassment. She cleared her throat, her eyes quickly scanning the work laid out on the desktop in front of her.

Pens, paper, computer.

She glanced up at the figure standing over her and gave a sickly smile. To be caught daydreaming was one thing, but to be caught by Mr Gibson? Definite death penalty.

Mr Gibson walked around the desk and stood beside her, peering down at her monitor, disapproval radiating off him like heat from an open blaze. Ella quickly whipped an incriminating, half-finished pencil doodle of Wolverine from the X-Men off the top of her inbox and stuffed it in her desk drawer with a nervous titter, then sat up straighter and tapped the computer screen with the end of a pencil, the very model of efficiency. "Report's going well. Anything else I can do for you?"

Mr Gibson removed his glasses and rubbed at the bridge of his nose. "How 'bout getting me a beer?"

Ella laughed self-consciously. "I would if I could. They're just having a problem with that legal drinking age thing."

"Hmm?"

"Never mind." Ella yawned discretely, weighing up her chances. "Do you mind if I knock off a bit early today? I didn't sleep at all well last night."

"Ha! Probably dreaming of boys, right? You're about the right age for it."

"Boys? No." Ella turned quickly away and started tapping her keyboard as her face flushed. "Just not sleeping properly."

"You and me both, kiddo," Mr Gibson snorted, then picked up a half-finished mug of coffee from a nearby desk and sipped at it. His face scrunched up. "Cold! Damn. Listen, have that report on my desk first thing in the morning. I don't care when you write it. Just get it done. Can you do that?"

"You're the boss."

"Good. And sharpen that pencil. It's blunt."

"Yessir." Ella tried not to refrain from saluting. There was a rumor circulating that Mr Gibson used to be in the military, which his day-to-day conduct did nothing to dispel. She wouldn't have been surprised if he'd started the rumor himself.

"As you were, then."

Mr Gibson strode off through the door, hands behind his back, leaving Ella alone at her desk. After she had judged that a suitably long moment had passed, Ella peeked around the side of her computer, then let out the breath she didn't realize she'd been holding.

The office was empty. Finally, a little peace.

Ella stretched a hand out toward her desk drawer to retrieve her X-Men drawing, then froze. She could have sworn she'd heard a faint echo of laughter drifting up from an adjacent cubical.

"Hello?" she called.

No answer.

Ella leaned further out in her chair, craning her neck and peering through the forest of desks that filled the Student's Union office. She'd been working for the school paper ever since the fire hockey incident, and she really, really hated it. She was supposed to be doing three lunchtimes a week until the ice rink was repaired, but recently, even the ever-present threat of Mr Gibson's wrath paled in comparison to the mind-numbing boredom of writing endless articles about the school drama society.

Being a journalist sucked.

The office seemed to be empty, so Ella sat back in her chair again, then yawned deeply and threw a longing glance toward the window. She couldn't seem to focus on anything lately. Who could blame her for feeling distracted? This was supposed to be her lunch break, a calming oasis of relaxation in the middle of a long, boring day of classes, classes and more classes. Outside, there was sunshine and friends and fun and, more importantly, boys. She was more than tempted to split for the afternoon.

She breathed in deeply, savoring the rich aroma of cut grass drifting in through the open window, and came to a decision. She'd had enough for one day.

Time to go.

There was nobody in the office, but Ella wanted to make sure before she made off. Pushing back her keyboard, she stood up and made her way around the edge of her desk. The blind hung askew over the big bay window of the ramshackle office, allowing a single ray of sunshine into the room. The curtains drifted inward, caught on the light summer breeze. At the end of the office, the door to the walk-in stationary cupboard was ajar.

Odd.

Ella wandered across the room, meandering her way around the empty tables and desks, and stopped outside the cupboard. There was a faint scratching noise coming from inside it and Ella drew back a little, suddenly nervous. Lifting a hand, she reached out to close the door.

She jumped back with a yell as four silver blades burst out of the darkness and came slicing around the corner, passing within inches of her face

Ella shrieked and threw up her hands in self defense, then her brain caught up with her eyes. She dropped her hands and raised an eyebrow instead.

"Henry!"

"The Scissor Man cometh!" Henry announced, then threw his head back and cackled at the ceiling. He grinned at her, highly pleased with himself and pretended to slash at her with the pair of long office scissors he held in each hand, stolen from the store cupboard.

Furious, Ella batted his hands away and scowled at him. "You little shit! You scared me half to death!"

"Evidently not." Henry made a gesture to indicate that, whatever she said, Ella was very much alive.

Ella scowled at him. "So, you hang out in stationary cupboards now? Did I miss a meeting?"

"I was listening to this." Henry held up a crackling CB radio. "There's great reception in there. I can get aircraft control towers and cop cars and everything. Better than watching TV any day."

"You're a freak."

"Thank you." Henry yawned widely, running a hand through his white-striped hair, then gave Ella a look of sudden interest. "Did I hear someone mention beer, or was I mistaken?"

"You were mistaken. Very much so. And put those things down before you cut yourself. Not that I give a damn, I just don't want to spend hours cleaning blood out of the carpet with a toothbrush when Mr Gibson gets back from lunch. 'Cos you know he'd make me."

"As you wish, m'lady." Henry tossed the scissors down and doffed his baseball cap. He glanced around the room, noticing that it was empty, then fixed Ella with a hopeful look. He smiled winningly, then opened his mouth to speak.

"To save you time, no, I'm not making out with you. Ever."

Henry shrugged. "Your loss, cutie." He peeked around the corner. "Has Captain Monobrow gone?"

"Thankfully." Ella peered more closely at Henry, and was about to speak when his CB radio buzzed. He held up a finger, listening hard, then shook his head and vanished back inside the cupboard. Ella sighed, leaning back on the desk. "Okay, fine. Don't mind me, I'll just wait out here," she informed the empty room.

As she waited, there was a tap on the office door. Ella leaned over and pulled it open to reveal a tall, lithe Italian girl. She smiled at Ella, revealing perfect, white teeth.

"Hey, you!" she gushed. "Can I come in?"

Without waiting for a reply, the girl strode rapidly into the office, smoothing back her glossy brunette hair. Her immaculately made-up face fell as she saw the rows of empty desks. "Oh, so it's just you in here? Where are all the other yummy writers?"

"They're at lunch. They write quicker than me." Ella forced a smile. "Nice to see you too, Jen."

"What? Oh yeah, thrilled. Have you seen Henry?"

Ella gestured toward the stationary cupboard. "He's in there. Knock yourselves out. I'm leaving."

"What, already?" Jen pretended to be shocked. "But there's two full minutes left of lunch break. Shouldn't you make the most of them? I'm sure there's time for you to pen another magnum opus for the Canoe Club."

"Nah, I'm sure they can live without me," said Ella, choosing to ignore the sarcasm in Jen's voice.

Ella had known Jen for years, but still, she sometimes wondered if putting up with her crap was really worth it. They weren't exactly friends, but Jen was less bitchy toward her than she was toward most people, which in her book, probably made them best buddies. Despite their very obvious differences, Ella had made a big effort to stay on Jen's good side over the years. Jen lived in a five-bedroom mansion high in the hills, owned pretty much everything a girl of her age could want and threw some pretty amazing parties, not to mention having some very influential friends.

And then there was that other thing...

Jen gave an indifferent shrug and peered into the stationary cupboard. "Coming to the party tomorrow night?" she called back to Ella.

"Party?" Ella perked up a little. "First I've heard of it."

"Ten o'clock. After cheerleading practice. Henry knows where." Jen hunted around for a light switch inside the cupboard, gave up and reached instead into her bag for a tube of lipstick. Twisting the base, she applied a thick coat to her already perfectly made-up lips, checking her reflection in the reflective nameplate above Ella's desk. She pressed her lips together, then planted a sticky kiss on the nameplate to blot her lips. "Perfecto."

Ella watched her and said nothing.

"Jenny?" came a sudden cry of recognition from the depths of the cupboard.

"Hey, Henry," Jen called back. "You're coming to the bash tomorrow night, I take it?"

Henry emerged from the cupboard in a cloud of chalk dust, sneezing explosively. "I'll check my schedule, make sure I'm not doing anything more important."

Jen curled her lip. "More important than partying? You're kidding, right?"

"No, there was something I was s'posed to do..." Henry thought for a moment. "Nope, it's gone. I'm sure it was important."

"Maybe you dreamed it," interjected Jen.

"Doubtful. Haven't had a good dream in ages."

"Know what you mean." Jen pulled out a bristle brush and started brushing her long hair, looking thoughtful. "I feel like I didn't sleep a wink last night." She frowned, gazing into the middle distance. "Matter of fact, I don't remember having a single dream in this whole entire month." She considered her statement. "Well, apart from daydreams. But hell, fantasy's better than reality any day, right?"

"You're telling me," agreed Ella, a flash of guilt shooting through her.

"I had this dream once where there were all these naked chicks, and they all wanted me, then I looked down and instead of a dick I had a bottle opener," offered Henry helpfully.

Outside the window, a cricket chirped.

"Yeah, that's weird," said Jen. She gave Henry a strange look and turned back to Ella. "So anyway..."

"Wait, there's a punchline." Henry backed away, holding up his hands. "So I asked them, come on now, which one of you lovely ladies would like the first screw? Ha!" He slapped a hand on the table. "Screw, geddddit?" He chortled and grinned at the two girls, who looked at him as one might watch a two year-old doing something faintly revolting with a dead goldfish.

"Knew there was a reason he wasn't allowed out in public," said Ella. She yawned again, covering her mouth with an inky hand.

"Hey, would you quit doing that? You're going to set me off too—ah, crap." Jen gave a huge yawn, then swore and started reapplying her lip gloss. "Catching. Strange, isn't it?"

"What's catching?" The door opened again and Nikki stuck her head through, a timid-looking younger girl dressed from head to toe in black. She wore flame-painted, metal-tipped boots with silver buckles under her long skirt and her clothes were at least three years out of date. She had a white bandage on her left wrist and a nervous look on her face,

"Yawning," said Ella. "Hey Nickster."

"How's it going?" Nikki gave Ella a quick hug, then turned round and pushed the door open with her toe. "Matt, you coming in? Jen's here."

There was a non-committal grunt from outside in the corridor, then a dark-haired boy peered around the edge of the door, a look of suspicion on his face. He waved awkwardly. "Hey," he said.

"And the gang's all here," muttered Jen, pulling a face. Matt was Henry's best friend and she gave every appearance of hating him. He was a year and a half older than the rest of them, which in teen years practically made him geriatric. Jen only let him hang out with them because she'd heard that his daddy was loaded, but he didn't seem to care. Being friends with Jen certainly had its benefits.

"Hey, dude!" Henry gave him a high-five. "We're all talking 'bout our dreams here. Care to share?"

"Not much."

"Okay then, don't." Henry shrugged.

"I don't dream," said Matt curtly. His beady eyes flicked around the room quickly before settling on Jen. "Hey," he said.

"Hi," said Jen brightly. "We were just leaving. Weren't we?" she nudged Ella.

"What? Oh, yeah," said Ella. She gave Matt an apologetic look and was gratified to see him shrug matter-of-factly.

Whatever.

Matt didn't care about anything very much beyond death metal and that weird sculpture shit he did out of school hours. Everyone thought he was a bit weird, but he always reminded Ella of a dog that had been kicked one time too many. He was passably attractive, with floppy hair and sharply cut cheekbones, but his eyes were lackluster, deadened by years of tough breaks and dope smoking.

The only time his eyes lit up was when he looked at Jen.

Ella couldn't help feeling a little bit sorry for him, but then, any guy who dared to set their sights on Jen basically got what they deserved. She patted him on the shoulder. "I'll see you later," she said kindly.

Matt gave her a sad little smile. "I guess."

Jen glared at him before turning back to Ella. "So *anyway*, the party." She threw a dirty look at Matt, who met her gaze with his characteristic deadpan expression, then abruptly turned away from them. "I met this guy who said there's this really cool place

underneath the Medi Lab up at the other school site. It's huge inside and nobody goes there. It burned down, I think. It'd be great for a party. Whaddaya think?"

"Sounds groovy." Ella reached under her desk and picked up her schoolbag, doing up the buckle. She slung it over her shoulder and started stuffing her books into it. "So," she said, with affected nonchalance. "Who else is coming?"

"Most people," said Jen carelessly. She pulled a stick of gum out of her pocket, unwrapped it and popped it into her mouth.

"Is that all? Hardly sounds worth it to me."

"You're cute. But you should come. I need some people to help carry the beer. Dimitri's screwed his knee up again, so he's regulated to ordering the wine." Jen smiled, popping her gum mindlessly.

"Typical guy, ducking out just when I need him. They're all the same."

"Well, I guess I could swing by," said Ella, while her heart leapt inside her.

Dimitri was going to the party.

Already, her mind was alive with a dozen different plans, most of them involving what to wear tomorrow night.

She glanced furtively at her watch. Only thirty-one hours to go. Better start thinking about getting ready. She was glad she'd packed her nail varnish into her school bag that morning, so she could get a head start.

"Attagirl. We'll meet round at yours. Usual time." Jen patted Ella on the head like an obedient dog. Ella smiled back at her, treacherous thoughts dancing in her mind. She shoed them away, comforting herself with the knowledge that if Jen was doing what she thought she was doing with Matt, then it was okay.

Hell, all was fair in love and war, right? Two negatives make a positive, after all.

She glanced back over her shoulder, watching Jen as she chatted away with Henry, steadfastly ignoring Matt's furtive glances and gave a faint smile. It was almost her duty to take Dimitri off Jen's hands. Jen already had so much—the cars, the looks, the money—she

certainly didn't deserve to have Dimitri too, especially not as she was running around behind his back like that.

So what if she lost Jen's friendship in the process? No big deal.

"So, how's the writing going?"

"Writing?" Ella stared blankly at Nikki, then she remembered.

The report. Shit!

She only had a hundred or so words done and all of it was garbage. She'd been planning to redo it that evening, but now if there was gonna be a party tomorrow night to organize... "It's not going anywhere. And neither am I till it's done."

Sighing, Ella dumped her bag back down on her desk and sat heavily back down in her office chair. She had a free period before phys-ed, which was supposed to be spent revising, but to hell with it. She'd have to get the report done right then if she was going to go to the party.

All she had to do was figure out what to write about.

Nikki wandered over to Ella's desk, and began picking up things and examining them. "So," she said quietly, her voice so soft that Ella could barely hear it. "You coming to the party tomorrow?"

"That's what I said." Ella glanced up at Nikki, a worried look on her face. The girl always seemed on the verge of some kind of nervous breakdown and her timid attitude didn't exactly help her out in the popularity stakes.

Jen looked up. "Yeah, Goth Girl's going. She's always good for a laugh."

Ella looked at her crossly and gave a little shake of her head.

"What? Oh, I mean, *ready for* a laugh." Jen gave Ella a "you're such a wuss" glance. Nikki picked up her bag and headed for the door, her lower lip visibly trembling.

"Nikki, wait, she didn't mean..."

The door banged, and Nikki was gone.

Ella glared. Jen looked back at her smugly, as though daring her to make an issue out of it. After a moment, Ella dropped her eyes and bit her tongue.

Just think of the party.

In the silence that followed, Henry wandered over to join them. He perched on the edge of the desk and ruffled Ella's hair. "You digging in for the night?"

"Afraid so."

"That sucks. Still, gotta go to that party tomorrow, right?"

Ella glanced up at him sharply. Henry gazed down at her, a strange expression on his face and Ella was reminded not for the first time—that Henry was actually a lot brighter than he made out.

"I guess," she replied, affecting indifference. "All that drinking and dancing sure is a drag, but I'm sure I'll manage. You going?"

"Ha! In my dreams!" said Henry. "Only if the Quick-E-Mart burns down..." His voice tailed off and a faraway look came into his eyes. He shook his head and his eyes snapped back into focus. "Sorry. Just picturing it."

"Boss still giving you trouble?" said Ella sympathetically

"A little. Remind me—is murder still a crime?"

"Far as I know."

"Figures." Henry stuffed his CB radio into his backpack and stood up. "Listen, I gotta split. Don't let Captain Dipshit next door give you any grief, all right?"

"I'll try." Ella yawned again, stretching her arms up behind her head.

"And quit yawning! You're making me feel tired. Perhaps you should get some of that sleep stuff tonight, 'stead of going out with Jen and her assorted friends." Henry looked at her meaningfully.

"Okay, Mom." Ella wiped at her eyes, feigning ignorance. "I swear, if I don't get this damn report done soon I'm gonna be dreaming about it tonight."

"I thought you girls were doing the whole 'not dreaming' thing right now. It's a whole new fashion, right?"

"Will be, by the time Jen's finished with it." Ella smiled up at him. "Wanna join the club before they stop giving out shares?"

"I'm already there. Don't remember having a single dream lately. Apart from the corkscrew dick one, but that was last month." Henry scratched his head, looking thoughtful.

"You just had to bring that one up again, right?"

"It's a compulsion." Henry leaned over and gave her a quick peck on the forehead, then headed toward the door. "Ciao for now, bella."

The school bell rang, signaling the end of lunchbreak and Matt followed Henry out of the door. Jen dropped a party invite on her desk and breezed out after him.

Finally. Back to work.

As peace descended over the room again, Ella closed the blinds, then pinned the party invite above the monitor. Settling back on her chair, she stared at the blank page on the computer screen.

After a minute or so, a tiny glimmer of an idea started to form in her mind. Smiling to herself, she pulled out her computer keyboard and typed, "Springwood High Stops Dreaming—Official!"

Smiling to herself, Ella bent over her keyboard and started typing up her report. When old Gibson read this pile of garbage, he'd throw her out of the office for good.

In the school basement, something stirred.

It was a small thing at first, practically invisible. Then, as it grew in strength, it doubled, tripled, quadrupled in size, wavering like a heat haze in the desert. Sparkling motes of dust swirled around it as it—tried, unsuccessfully, to take shape. A small cyclone of scholastic trash was whipped up in the wind that came from nowhere, forgotten essays joining janitor's receipts and discarded candy wrappers in the miniature whirlwind.

A moment later, a small rat scuttled out of its hidey-hole beneath a tall rusted cabinet full of files, attracted by the commotion. It snuffled around for a moment, whiskers quivering, then turned and scampered across the floor toward the whirlwind, tail held high, moving with that darting, high-speed gait guaranteed to send cartoon women in long skirts diving for a chair.

Something smelled good. Real good.

The rat's bright black eyes sparked as it applied her tiny mammalian brain to tracking down the source of the smell. Pausing

at the foot of the stairs, it gave a flick of her tail, then rose on her hind legs and sniffed cautiously at the air.

Then it exploded in a plume of bright rat blood.

A moment later, the swirling dust cloud settled, and a disembodied voice was heard, saying very clearly, "Ah, crap."

Then all was still again.

THREE

Jacob sat alone on the metal slab of the examining room of the ward at Westin Hills and stared down at the floor.

It was green linoleum tile, cracked and weathered at the edges, with little flecks of white in it. Jacob pictured the board of directors out shopping for linoleum, bypassing all the plain green tile, then announcing "Yes! This is it! The one with the little white flecks!" before buying up the entire stock and returning to pave the whole asylum with the stuff.

Jacob gave a little giggle at the thought, then quickly sobered up.

He'd just killed four people. Now was hardly the time to be laughing over linoleum.

Or maybe now was the perfect time. He'd distracted himself from reality for—what? All of five seconds? That was good. Five whole seconds without that terrible, sick weight of guilt pressing down on him like a giant rain-sodden mattress. He'd have to do some more of that.

Now all he had to do was keep it up for a lifetime, and he'd be set.

The papers rustled on the desk behind him and Jacob glanced tiredly over his shoulder. There was nobody there, of course. The door to the room was locked, triple-barred and guarded by four cops.

But that didn't mean that he was safe.

In fact, far from it.

Jacob shivered, his eyes scanning the room with practiced care. It was thirty feet by forty-five feet square—he knew, because he'd paced around it with mathematical precision a dozen times in the last hour and now here he was, back on the table again. The room was empty save the desk, the padded table he was sitting on and the big mirror on the far wall. No chairs, no decorations. Nothing sharp or throwable that he could use to escape. The only thing in the room that wasn't bolted down was the big pile of papers stacked up on the desk behind him and that was a fat lot of good as a weapon. He'd glanced through the top few when he'd awoken—just case notes,

arrest warrants, the usual kind of thing. He'd looked under the pile, just in case, but there was no pen.

Jacob rocked back on the table and looked down at his hands. They were shaking. His entire body was still vibrating from head to toe with the adrenaline rush of shock. There was no window, so he hadn't a clue what time it was, but, judging by the cold ache in his bones, he guessed that it must be approaching one or two in the morning.

So much for a good night's sleep.

But that was what Freddy wanted, right? Tire him out, let his control slip for just one minute.

Yeah, he'd like that.

Jacob ground his teeth together, thinking hard. While he was asleep, he was safe. The pills made sure of that. But during his waking hours, he was pretty much on his own. Nobody knew his secret. He'd never let on, for fear they'd give him more drugs—maybe the wrong ones—and then Freddy would be free. He shouldn't have mentioned anything to anyone in the first place, but he'd just been so scared.

After what seemed like an age, there was a tap at the door. Jacob looked at it for a couple of seconds, before realizing that a response was required. "Come in," he said, without much enthusiasm.

The door creaked open and a uniformed guard with a face like a weasel stuck his head round the door. "Gotta visitor," he announced flatly. He held the door open and stared at Jacob for a moment, as though his head might fly off on a spring or something.

Asshole, thought Jacob sourly.

A moment later the door swung open again and a tall, imposing man with muttonchops and a velvet waistcoat strode into the room, his shoulder-length black hair flying out behind him. He was tailed by a stern-looking nurse with a clipboard and wild gray hair.

Jacob recognized the man immediately and perked up.

Jack Kane.

Kane was Jacob's caseworker and a frequent visitor to his ward on the third floor. In the three years he'd known him, Jacob had come to look forward to Kane's little visits immensely. With a regular and

flagrant disregard for the rules, Kane would always bring him an illicit pack of cigarettes or a copy of *Hustler*, anything to help Jacob pass the time and make his life a little less crap. He would smuggle them in past the guards and leave them under Jacob's pillow, so that he'd find them when he went to bed that night.

In a strange way, Kane was the closest thing Jacob had ever had to a father.

Jacob looked up at Kane and for the first time in nearly twenty-four hours, he smiled. "Hey," he said.

"Jacob, my main man." Kane's voice was strong and warm, with a faint hint of a Scottish burr that blended surprisingly well with his Canadian accent. He stepped into the room and removed his horn-rimmed spectacles, showing no trace of the nervousness the cop had shown. He studied Jacob with great concern. "You look like shit."

Jacob looked down at himself, at his bloodied, shredded nightgown and gave a bleak laugh. "Would it hold any water if I told you I didn't do it?" he asked.

"None whatsoever," said Kane smoothly. "But points for effort."

"Damn." Jacob took a shaky breath and tried to smile. "So I guess that Sunday morning trip to the park is cancelled?"

"You could say that." Kane wandered over and sat down on the metal table beside Jacob, to the obvious alarm of the nurse. He lowered his voice, all trace of humor leaving his eyes. "Wanna tell me what happened?"

"Freddy happened, that's what," said Jacob darkly.

"Ah yes, Freddy," said the nurse, before Kane had a chance to reply. She thumbed through the thick pile of Jacob's case notes, then gave up with a grimace. "I've heard that name before. Want to fill me in, Jack?"

"Sure." Kane gave Jacob a brief look of apology, then took the case file from the nurse and settled back on the table, opening the report onto the first page. "It's an interesting case. Freddy—Fred Krueger—have you heard of him?"

"I've heard, something." The nurse looked distinctly uncomfortable. "Wasn't he the guy who killed all those kids?"

"That's right. Krueger murdered nearly thirty kids, some years back." Kane's eyes darkened. "The children he killed were all little'uns—six or seven years of age, mostly and they all lived in Springwood. He had a thing for little girls, he was a real nasty piece of work. Everyone knew someone who had lost a kid—a friend, a neighbor, a relative—the town was ripped apart by this guy."

"That's terrible. Did they catch him in the end?"

Jacob shifted uneasily on the beach, looking up at Kane with a question in his eyes.

Kane ignored him and carried on. "In a way, yes. Kid number thirty goes missing and finally, this cop gets a tip-off and goes to his house, finds all this sick shit. Photos of the dead kids, toys, bits of hair. He'd kept them as trophies. The cop knows there's another kid missing, so he goes screaming up to the big power plant where this guy works, and literally catches him red-handed. He'd just killed this little girl and he was going to use the plant's furnace to dispose of the body. Just like he did with the rest of the kids. He really thought that he could get away with it." Kane shrugged and flicked through Jacob's file. "So finally this dirtbag gets hauled in and dragged to court, but after all that, he escapes on a technicality. The cop didn't have a search warrant when he busted him and so this slimebag gets off scott-free."

The nurse shook her head wonderingly. "But surely if they found all that stuff at his house?"

Kane shook his head. "It was inadmissible as evidence. The judge's hands were tied." Kane sat forward on the bench, excitement lighting up his eyes. "But that's not the end of it. Later that night, a big bunch of local folk get together outside the courthouse. Parents. Teachers. Neighbors. Friends. Friends of friends. They're out for blood and who can blame them? Krueger killed their kids, then laughed in their faces." Kane took a deep breath, avoiding Jacob's gaze. "They basically hunted this guy down and trapped him in his own boiler room, then set light to the place and stood around and watched him burn. *Boom!* Psycho goes up in smoke, the world is healed, the end." Kane closed the file and tossed it down on the bench next to Jacob.

"And they didn't get arrested for that?" asked the nurse, looking uncomfortable.

Kane shook his head. "There were cops amongst that lynch mob. Even the sheriff was there. Or so I heard. It was all very hush-hush." Kane glanced quickly up at the nurse. "You signed the confidentiality agreement when you joined us, right?"

"Right."

"Good job, or we'd have to kill you. No, sorry—bad taste joke," he said as the nurse took a step backward. Kane spread his hands wide and gave a hasty little laugh. "It's all in the past. Nobody wants to remember that stuff. It's over now."

"Except that it isn't, is it?" said Jacob quietly, gazing at the floor. The nurse looked at him. Jacob regarded her coldly through red-rimmed eyes for a second, before jerking his head at Kane. "Tell her," he said.

"Tell her what?" Kane's smile seemed to freeze.

"The rest of it. About the other kids. About my folks. About *me*."

"Oh, I don't think she needs to know about that," Kane said quickly. He flicked through Jacob's file again, then turned and beckoned the nurse over to the other side of the room. Jacob watched them suspiciously from the table. "He's basically delusional," whispered Kane. "His father died in a car accident before he was born, and he thinks that Krueger came back from the dead and killed him." He shook his head, watching Jacob closely. "This triggered a drive for revenge against Krueger's ghost, which caused him to harm himself during various self-directed revenge attempts, which usually take place at night. He believes he has special powers to control people's dreams—delusions brought on by ideas implanted in early childhood by his mother, who was... well, we all know about his mother."

Kane leaned over to the nurse and pointed to a page in Jacob's file. The nurse exclaimed, "Oh!" and looked at Jacob with fresh interest, who glowered up at her, before shooting Kane an affronted look.

"So why was he sharing a dorm room?"

A muscle in Kane's jaw twitched. "He's made great progress over the last few years. We thought he was cured." Kane shrugged

helplessly. "Looks like the ghost is back."

"Freddy's not a ghost," shouted Jacob, from the other side of the room.

Kane cursed under his breath. The kid had good hearing. "Jacob, we've been over this," he said loudly. "Fred Krueger is dead. He died years before your father had his accident. He couldn't possibly have killed him."

"Says you."

Kane closed Jacob's case file with a snap that made both Jacob and the nurse jump. "Ethel, could you be a sweetheart and go get me a blanket? I think there's some left in the store cupboard on the second floor. You must be cold, right?" he asked Jacob, nodding his head fractionally. He did not smile.

"Freezing my balls off, thanks for asking," replied Jacob pleasantly.

"Indeed. Sitting there in that gown. We can't let you change till forensics get here, but we can at least wrap you up a bit."

"Forensics?" said Jacob. A wave of gray tiredness washed over him. He pushed his dark hair back off his face, leaving a faint smudge of dried blood on his forehead and rubbed his hands together miserably, glancing around the room. Little flakes of dried blood floated downward, rubbed off his palms. "So I can't have a shower?"

Kane shook his head. "Sorry, kid."

Jacob rubbed his eyes with the back of his hand, then tiredly turned to the nurse as she started toward the door. "Could you get me a double half-caff, all-foam latté with skimmed dog milk while you're down there?"

"Excuse me?"

"Get him a coffee from the machine," Kane translated.

"I like it extra lumpy," added Jacob helpfully, picking the dried blood from his fingernails.

The nurse gave him a strange look and walked to the door, leaving with a considerable amount of haste.

When they were alone, Jacob stood up and wandered over to the mirror, his back to Kane. "You think I'm a whacko, don't you?" he

said, gazing at his own haggard, bloodstained reflection.

"Well, yeah," said Kane. "This is a nuthouse, after all. If you were sane then I'd be inclined to be worried about you by now."

"You and me both," said Jacob distantly. He reached out a finger and touched the mirror. It left a rust-red mark. He stared at it for a moment, then put another beside it and one below, then drew a smiley mouth at the bottom, making a face.

Jacob stared at the face in a sleep-deprived fog.

He was really losing it.

Then he jumped as the mouth moved. It squirmed across the glass as though it were alive. It shimmered slightly, then twisted upwards into a malevolent grin.

"Hi Jacob," said the face.

On the other side of the two-way glass, Police Officer Tom Dewey watched Jacob as he stared fixedly at his own reflection in the mirror, a freaked-out look in his eyes. "There's something seriously wrong with that kid," he said.

"You're telling me," replied Officer Lopez. She clicked off her CB radio and reached for her styrofoam cup of coffee. She took a sip and grimaced. "Jeez, what is this shit? Are you trying to poison me?"

"It's all they had. Take it or leave it."

Officer Lopez took another experimental sip. "It's like drinking the contents of a colostomy bag. No wonder the poor kid went postal, drinking this crap every day."

"What are they going to do with him, do you think?"

"The kid?" Officer Lopez shrugged. "Solitary for a couple days while they run some tests, then they'll bang him up for x number of years, till he's dead or sorry, possibly both."

"You don't think they'll plead insanity?"

"Nah. You read his case file?"

"Twice."

"Me too." A pause. "Does *he* know?" Officer Dewey jerked a thumb through the observation window, where Kane was chatting to Jacob.

The two officers shared a look, then, as one, put down their drinks and headed for the door.

Jacob stared at the face in the glass, forcing himself to remain expressionless. He was being watched from both sides and to start a conversation with a talking mirror in a loony bin would not help his case.

"Jacob," croaked the face again, then broke into a throaty chuckle. The eyes on the glass blinked then started to enlarge, the dried blood around their edges liquifying. The pupils snapped into focus on Jacob, reflecting his own image back at him in a thousand shimmering shades of red. Slowly, the face started to become three-dimensional, pushing itself out of the mirror with a sound like a finger squeaking across a wet glass.

Fuck off, Jacob thought desperately.

The face laughed nastily. "What was that? You'll have to speak up a bit, kid. Or draw me some ears."

"Leave me alone!" said Jacob. Across the room, Kane glanced over at him, a worried look in his eyes.

The face merely smirked, then pushed itself further out of the mirror with a wet sucking sound. It was solid and Jacob was repulsed to see that there were maggots crawling around in the blood that it was formed from, writhing and crawling over one another and then flattening out to form the blood-coated skin of the face. The eyes creased into a smile as they took in Jacob's disheveled appearance. "Nice job back there, by the way." A gauntleted hand punched through the mirror, and mimed stabbing motions. Blood dripped onto the floor. "Couldn't have done it better myself."

"Shut up," whispered Jacob.

"No, seriously. That bit where you stabbed that screaming little bitch? Right in the gut! That was priceless."

"I said *shut up!*"

"Jacob?" Kane hurried across the room to join him. "What is it?"

"Nothing," growled Jacob. He glared at the leering face, knowing that Kane wouldn't be able to see it. "Everything's just hunky dory."

"You know what?" growled the face. "You really wanna be just like me? You should get a hat."

"I don't want a hat," said Jacob levelly.

Kane reached out to put a hand on Jacob's shoulder. "You know what? Maybe you should come and sit down again—"

"I don't want to sit down!" Jacob whirled and glared at Kane. A vein in his neck started to throb.

"All right, that's cool." Kane held up his hands, backing off. "Listen, I'm just going next door for a—"

Jacob gave a yell as a bloodstained hat suddenly materialized on his head. For an instant he felt maggots crawling around under it, trying to burrow into his scalp and he swept it off onto the floor with a cry of disgust. He began stamping on it, frantically running his hands through his hair as though he were being attacked by a swarm of wild bees.

"Jacob?" Kane watched him in concern. The kid was having some kind of a fit. He hesitated, then reached into his briefcase for a sedative. "What is it?" he asked. "Is it Freddy again?"

"Don't patronize me," snapped Jacob. "I know you don't believe that shit." In the mirror, Freddy winked at him, then slowly started to slide his fingerknives through the glass, one at a time, out into the real world.

Sccccccrrreeeeeeeeeeeeeeee...

Razor-sharp metal scraped across cut glass, and every muscle in Jacob's body tensed. He watched the points of Freddy's knives emerge from the mirror, the reflective surface sticking to them like shiny glue. A voice hissed in his ear, a sibilant whisper that seemed to bypass Jacob's brain and go straight to his spinal column. "I need your help, Jacob. The kids have forgotten me. I need you to make them remember."

Jacob said nothing, staring fixedly at the wall.

"You know what you can do if you try. You could be just like me."

"Shut up," said Jacob desperately. He put his hands over his ears and grabbed handfuls of his hair. "I'll never be like you. I'll die first."

"Okay. Fine." Kane paused a moment, then put his meds back in the bag. He was going to need something stronger. "I'm just worried about you, Jacob. You've been through a lot tonight."

A second knife emerged from the glass, bit by bit.

Screeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee...

Jacob's fists clenched as he stared at the emerging knife. "I'd be worried, too." He gave a humorless smile, feeling madness dance a little jig in his brain, then wheeled to confront Kane. "And quit being nice to me, Jack. I just butchered my bunkmates. Why the hell are you being so nice to me? Huh?"

"I just want you to calm down, that's all."

"I *am* calm!"

In the mirror, Freddy smirked. "You know your daddy cried before I killed him?"

Jacob whirled and grabbed Kane's briefcase, and hurled it with all his might through the two-way mirror.

"Don't move!"

Two cops burst into the room, aiming their pistols right at him. Before Kane could move they ran over to Jacob and grabbed him, wrestling him to the floor. Jacob didn't fight them. The door flew open behind them and Dr Timmerman, head of the faculty, came in. He gave Kane an accusing look, then strode rapidly forward, pulling a syringe out of his pocket.

Kane stood in his way. "What are you doing? He's not trying to get away!"

"Stand aside, Jack."

Timmerman crunched his way across the broken glass on the carpet to Jacob. He reached for his arm, needle at the ready and was rewarded with a hefty backswipe to the face. Jacob was young, but he made the most of the daily workouts the faculty offered. The psychiatrist clutched at his face as blood spurted from his nose. "Hold him, dammit!" he shouted.

"Sorry, sir." Officer Lopez had the decency to look abashed.

"For Christ's sake. Look at this mess." Dr Timmerman grabbed Jacob's flailing arm and plunged his needle into the muscle of his bicep. He withdrew the needle and sniffed. "No wonder this place is falling apart."

Kane stepped forward. "I was only trying to—"

Timmerman rounded on him angrily. "I don't care what you were trying to do, Jack. Rules are rules. I *told* you to wait for me before debriefing the patient. We've already lost one kid this month. Why in the name of blue blazes can't you follow procedure for once in your life?"

"I'm sorry, I just thought that—"

"Oh, you *thought*, did you? Those were *children* he killed, Jack. Under my roof. What do you want me to tell their parents?"

"I had no way of knowing, Bill. He seemed better. I made the decision." Kane paused, then played his trump card. "Just like you did with his mother."

Dr Timmerman stared hard at Kane. His jaw clenched as he wrestled with himself, then he sighed and turned away. Reaching down, he hauled Jacob to his feet. The boy reeled, already in the grip of the sedative. "Hold him for me," he said gruffly.

Kane nodded briefly to himself.

Point made.

He grabbed Jacob around the shoulders, supporting him. Jacob slumped forward, then caught himself and put a hand on Kane's arm to steady himself.

"You should get away from me," Jacob whispered, his eyes unfocussed. "I've caused you enough trouble already. Why do you keep stickin' up for me?"

Kane glanced through the glass, then turned his body away from the mirror and leaned in close to Jacob. "Because I believe you," he whispered.

Jacob stared at him. "Are you crazy?"

"Quite possibly," said Kane. He glanced up at Timmerman, who was now venting his wrath by shouting at the cops, who stood by the shattered mirror looking for all the world like two small children being scolded by a schoolteacher.

Kane leaned in closer to Jacob. "Look—I've done some research into this Krueger guy and, well, I think we should talk." He eyed the cops and dropped his voice still lower. "I want to help you. I need to make sense of this as much as you do. If there's some kind of cover up—a conspiracy—whatever, I want to know what the real deal is."

Jacob stared at Kane, struggling to focus. "You really believe me?"

"Absolutely." Kane stood up. "You have my word. We'll talk. In the meantime," he gestured at Dr Timmerman. "I have to go make nice with the chief. You want me to stay on your case, right?"

"Right."

"Then wait here."

Kane winked at Jacob, then strolled over to Timmerman, picking his way across the broken glass on the floor. "Kid's lost it," he said quietly. "I'll dose him up."

Timmerman shrugged. "Tell me something I don't know." He pulled a big bottle of blue pills out of his bag and glanced over his shoulder at Jacob. "He got his Hypnocil last night, I trust?"

"Right."

"Good." Timmerman rattled the bottle before handing it to Kane. "I'd double the dosage. We can't be too careful, with these cops sniffing around. The guys upstairs can make the big lawsuits go away, but the last thing I want is some two-bit sheriff snooping around asking questions, getting everyone worked up." He gave Jacob a haunted look. "Know what I'm saying?"

"Absolutely. I'm right behind you." Kane cracked open the cap on the bottle of Hypnocil and made a big show of pouring several out into his hand. Then he strode over to Jacob, whistling.

As he reached him, he slipped the Hypnocil into his side pocket, then opened his other hand to reveal two identical blue vitamin pills.

Kane smiled to himself, then put a hand on Jacob's shoulder. "Hey, kid," he said lightly. "Time for your meds."

FOUR

Jen took a deep drag on her cigarette, then blew a thick stream of smoke out the window as she pulled out of the school parking lot. "So you're telling me that if Mr Daveys ever came onto you, you wouldn't leap at the chance to fuck him?"

"No! I mean, I don't know. He's like, what, thirty?" Ella gave a shudder. "That's way too old. Even if he is cute. With the most amazing hair in the world..." She trailed off, biting her bottom lip. "Okay. Maybe. But he'd have to be rich too and buy me lots of pretty shiny things. And have a wife who's away on business a lot."

"Honey, there's no such thing as too old." Jen shot Ella a knowing look. "You see those thighs when he was teaching track the other day? In those tight little shorts?"

"Every time I close my eyes," said Ella. She gave a low whistle and shook her head ruefully. "The man is built like a Greek god. I swear, if there hadn't been that chain link fence between him and me, they'd be scraping me off his leg like a dog in heat."

"You and me both, babe. We'd have to take a leg each." Jen handed Ella the remains of her cigarette, then scratched her nose, thinking. "Hey. You think he works out naked at home?"

"Don't!" Ella giggled helplessly and reached around to bat at Jen with one hand. She groaned, slapping her forehead with the other. "Okay. Now he's all naked in my head. I'm gonna need some serious drugs to get me to sleep tonight."

"Told you." Jen nodded sagely, then sighed and settled back in her seat. She waved an arm in frustration. "And here we are, stuck with a bunch of immature eighteen year-old losers. I tell you girl, you get the choice, pick the older ones. You'll have much more fun."

In the driver's seat, Matt's eyes flicked to the rearview mirror. Then he reached forward and abruptly switched the radio on. The frenetic sounds of thrash metal filled the car.

Jen rolled her eyes as if to say, "See what I mean?"

Ella winked at Jen, flicked her cigarette out of the window, then gazed happily out of the car as it picked up speed, cruising toward

the highway, music blaring loud. She normally hitched a lift home with Jen, but tonight it was Matt who was driving, after Jen's little fender bender last week had put her silver Mazda in the shop for two weeks, at a cost that had even given her father pause. Matt had a 1969 Ford convertible with a cherry red paint job and Ella had jumped at the chance to ride home with him. She loved riding in convertibles, top down, wind in her hair, trees streaking past overhead—so far removed from her parents' boring hatchback Sedan with the annoying back windows that didn't wind down, even in the eighty degree heat.

Though it meant having to spend an extra half-hour in Matt's presence, it was worth it. It wasn't that she didn't trust him, exactly, it was just that they didn't have much in common. Besides which, Ella was sure that Matt's offer to drive them both home tonight had nothing to do with the him overhearing her talking about the party...

She smiled to herself. Yeah, right.

Ella glanced at Matt as he changed gear, urging the little car up the steep hill toward the main road. He drove in silence, occasionally reaching down to change the radio station whenever something came on that was under 160 beats per minute. He'd said very little since they'd set out, contenting himself with the occasional furtive glance at Jen.

Ella wondered whether Jen even noticed.

"So, Little Miss Goth's coming to the party tomorrow night?" Jen asked.

Oh, God, here we go, Ella thought.

"You got a problem with that?"

"No, it's just that I..." Jen saw the expression on Ella's face and fell silent. Then she shrugged. "Okay, fine. She can come. But only if you look after her."

"No probs." Ella glanced out of the window, a little annoyed at Jen's attitude. Nikki had been through a tough time recently, what with her parents' divorce and all. Apparently both her folks were nut-jobs. Rumor was rife that her mother had recently been arrested after overdosing on heroin, which she'd heard had started the whole thing off. Nikki had previously confided to Ella that her parents took

out their anger at their crappy lives on her-every day she seemed to have a new bruise, a different bandage on her arm. It made Ella mad as hell, though she'd practically have to pry out of Nikki what had happened. She used to make up some crappy excuse about walking into the garage door or some other nonsense, but, since leveling with her, she would make it very clear when her parents were involved.

Her father was the worst, as she described it, coming home at all hours of the night in a foul temper, waking everybody up with his yelling. He regularly trashed the house and, as an only child, Nikki had nobody to defend her from him. Time and again Ella had threatened to call the cops on him, but Nikki had begged her not to. It would just make things worse, she'd said. Reluctantly, Ella had agreed not to interfere.

She kept an eye on her though, just in case. If Jen didn't share her concern, that was her problem.

Jen suddenly sat bolt upright in her seat. "Turn here."

"I know where you live, princess. I've dropped you off a dozen times."

"No, I want to go to the shoe store. I need some new heels for the party tonight. Be a sweetie and drop me off, would you? I'll call Dimitri for a ride home when I'm done."

"Whatever."

Matt turned the car into the parking lot of the outlet mall and slammed it into neutral, using what Ella thought was an unnecessary amount of force. Jen pulled her red purse out from under the seat, then looked at Matt expectantly. "What is this, the Springwood marathon? It's a mile across that lot to the store."

"I'm not your chauffeur. You've got legs. Use them."

"Fine." The door slammed and then Jen was gone.

Ella glanced at Matt, who avoided her gaze and threw the car into reverse, speeding backward out of the lot. He turned back onto the main road, accelerating off in a spray of gravel.

They drove in an uncomfortable silence for a few minutes, then Ella said, "She doesn't mean to be rude, you know."

Matt just shrugged, concentrating on the road. Then he reached down and clicked the radio to a different station, hunting for new

tunes. "So," he said casually. "Big party tomorrow night, huh?"

Ella tried not to smile. "So I hear. Jen's organizing it." She reached into her bag for her cellphone, watching Matt out of the corner of her eye. He ran through the radio stations without really listening to what was playing, occasionally glancing up at her.

After several long moments had passed, she decided to prod him a little. "Aren't you going to ask me where it is and what time it starts?"

Matt opened his mouth to reply, then thought better of it. He shrugged, trying to act casual. "Not really. I was just making conversation."

"Fine. If you don't want to go..."

Ella saw Matt's hands tighten on the wheel. She knew she could be a little bitch sometimes, but this was for his own good. If he was going to make any headway with Jen, he was going to have to learn to be more proactive.

She watched as he licked his lips and glanced up at her warily. "So, does she ever mention me?" he said at length. "I mean, at all?"

Ella glanced at Matt in surprise. That was brave, at least for him. She tried to answer without mortally offending him. "She's mentioned you," she said. Well, it was *kind* of the truth.

"She has?" Matt sounded so eager that Ella mentally kicked herself.

"Yeah, on a couple of occasions." In her head, Ella distinctly heard Jen's voice complaining at great length about Matt following her around like a puppy dog. Poor kid.

Matt opened his mouth to speak, then paused, staring out of the windshield.

"What?" asked Ella.

"That." Matt pointed to the road ahead of them. Two long black tire marks streaked across the asphalt in a zigzag line.

"Ouch." Ella looked further up, where the tracks left the road. The dark shape of a burnt-out SUV was visible in the field next to the road, surrounded by a maze of torn-up bushes and vegetation.

Matt slowed the car as they approached the wreck, peering through the side window.

"Don't stare!"

"Why not? There's nobody there." A strange glint came into Matt's eyes. "Wanna go check it out?"

Ella glanced at her watch.

"C'mon, it'll only take a minute. Besides which, I could use some more scrap metal."

"You working on a new sculpture?"

Matt actually laughed, as though he was surprised she even knew that much about him. "Something like that."

Ella clambered out of the convertible and stood with her hands on her hips, gazing down at the wreck in the rays of the setting sun.

Matt stepped up beside her, his eyes glittering. "Awesome."

Ella thumped him on the arm. "Don't say that. Somebody coulda died in there."

"What, do you think there might be bodies in there?"

"Ew! No!" Ella pulled a face.

"Pity. Let's go check it out anyway."

"You know, I really should be heading home..."

But Matt hopped eagerly over the wide drainage ditch that separated the field from the road and made his way down the grassy bank toward the wreck.

Ella sighed, glancing at her watch and mentally cursing Jen, then followed him at a slightly slower pace, gingerly picking her way over lumps of mud and brambles.

The hulk of the SUV stood alone in the midst of a circle of burned grass and vegetation. Its front windshield was smashed, and all the paintwork on its left hand side was charred and blackened. There was a string of striped yellow police tape wrapped around it.

"Hey! Come look at this!"

"What?"

Ella walked over to Matt, who was crouching by a nearby tree. He pointed at its trunk in a state of great excitement. "There's blood here."

"Oh, great. Do you want to go look inside the car for severed body parts too?"

Ella saw the flash of interest in Matt's eyes and immediately regretted opening her mouth. "You cannot be serious."

"C'mon. Where's your sense of adventure?"

"I had it surgically removed at birth. Let's just go."

"No way. This is too cool. I wanna check it out." Ella shook her head in wonder. She hadn't seen Matt this animated since they'd found a dead deer in the road last Christmas. There was something very odd about the guy, but she couldn't quite put her finger on it.

She took a step toward the SUV, studying it cautiously. One side of the car had been completely burned away, the underlying steel chassis exposed like a metallic skeleton. The wind rustled through the long grass and Ella almost fancied she could see the flames pouring off the car, like ghostly, ethereal fire.

She blinked and rubbed her eyes. She was seriously in need of some sleep.

A bird trilled in alarm as they approached the car. Matt rubbed his bare arms thoughtfully, glancing around him in distaste. "I hate nature," he said, with considerable feeling. "I always feel like it's out to get me."

Beckoning to Ella, he ducked under the police tape and examined the SUV. "Look—here." Matt pointed at the smashed windshield, which had a roughly circular hole on the driver's side, about a foot and a half across. "Dude wasn't wearing his seatbelt." He glanced back at the tree excitedly. "He was probably all like, 'Shit! My car's on fire!' Then he freaked out and went off the road, hit that sign back there and went flying out through the windshield. *Blam!* Right into that tree."

"Way to go, Mulder. Case closed. Listen, we should go. This place is creeping me out."

"Oh, quit being such a girl! You women-folk are too damn fragile." Matt tugged on the door handle experimentally. "Hey, look! It's open."

Ella stepped back in distaste as Matt yanked the back door open and stuck his head into the SUV, started rooting around inside the

car. A moment later he gave a triumphant cry and hopped back down again, waving a package at her. "Bingo!"

Ella looked worried. "Hey, maybe you shouldn't take that. What if it's evidence?"

"If it was evidence, then someone would've taken it after the crash," said Matt. He dropped down into a cross-legged position on the grass and began eagerly turning the charred box over in his hands, searching for an opening. Ella watched as he pulled a silver switchblade out of his boot and deftly sliced through the silver duct tape that sealed the box.

Inside were a bunch of papers. Ella crouched down by Matt and glanced over his shoulder as he emptied the box out onto the grass. He picked up the top sheet and studied it doubtfully. "You know, I was kind of hoping there'd be money in there. Or at least some decent porn."

"Here, let me see." Ella grabbed a handful of the papers and held them up to the dying afternoon sunlight. She flicked through the thick pile, fanning them out in her hands. "No porn here. Looks like copies of someone's medical records."

"Well, that sucks."

"What did you expect? The secrets of the ancients?"

Matt shrugged, then clicked his knife shut and returned it to its hiding place. He drifted back across to the wreck, eyeing it appraisingly.

For want of anything better to do, Ella sat back on the long grass and began reading the records as sounds of scraping and clattering came from over her shoulder. After a while she paused, frowning. "Matt?"

"Mmm?" Matt paused in his attempts to remove the front hub-cap from the car with his penknife and peered over at Ella. "What?"

"Come take a look at this."

Ella handed the records to Matt and watched as he read, occasionally moving his mouth at the more difficult words. Finally he asked, "This for real?"

"You're the one who found them. You tell me."

Matt slowly shook his head. "This is some freaky shit. And look at this." He held out the bottom paper, which was quite clearly stamped with an official-looking logo. "Secret government stuff." Matt's eyes were shining. "And we found it!"

"I don't know. We should put it back. What if it gets us into trouble?"

"Who the hell cares?" Matt was engrossed. He leaned in closer to Ella as he read, putting a hand on her shoulder to steady himself. "That's just crazy! What is this guy, some kind of mutant freak? Look at all this stuff!"

Ella scratched her head. "That's gotta be fake. I don't see how he could do that."

"And look here." He thrust a grubby finger at the paper and gave a long, low whistle. "All these test results. I don't believe it. This has got to be a setup."

Ella peered at the bottom of the report. "Who's Freddy Krueger?" She paused, squinting at the paper. "And why is he classified?"

Behind her, the long grass rippled in a sudden breeze that sprang up from nowhere.

Ella shivered. "It says..." She paused, her lips moving soundlessly. "Oh no. No. That can't be right. I don't believe that."

"Told you," said Matt, matter-of-factly. He flicked the report with a finger. "Conspiracy. Wait till Jen sees this stuff."

"Matt, I don't know about this. If it's real and we show it to people, we could get into trouble."

"Sounds like fun to me." Matt's face was alight with excitement. Ella had never seen him more animated. He glanced around him at the trees, making sure nobody else was around. "Hey," he said lowering his voice. "You want to go for a drink? We could, you know, talk about this, figure out what to do. I bet there's some secret government agency that would just kill to get their paws on this stuff."

"I don't know. Maybe some other day. It's late," said Ella unhappily.

"Well, that sucks." A look of anger flashed across Matt's face. "What've you got to do that's more important than this?"

"I should really be getting home. My folks are expecting me."

"Really?"

"Really."

"To do what?"

"You know. Dinner. TV. Parenty stuff."

Matt stared at Ella as the wind rustled in the grass. "It's me, isn't it?" he said.

"What is?" Ella turned away and gathered up the papers. He was looking at her in a way that she didn't much like. "I don't know what you're talking about." She reached for the box, then found Matt's hand on hers, gripping her wrist lightly. She turned and looked into eyes, that were the color of the sea before a storm.

"Yes, you do." Matt's voice was low and cold. He shifted his grip, his fingers lightly brushing the soft skin on the underside of her wrist. "You're a reporter. If I was anyone else, you'd be all over this. You just don't want to spend any more time with me than you absolutely have to, do you?" He glanced at his watch. "Hell, you've been with me for over half an hour now. You must be just itching to get away. Right?"

"That's not true."

"Bullshit. I know what you guys say about me behind my back."

Ella swung round and stared at Matt. "Meaning?"

"You just think I'm after Jennifer. None of you really care a shit about me. You don't even want me at your stupid party. But that's alright. I couldn't expect you to understand."

"Look, Matt—"

"No, *you* look." He tightened his grip. "I don't know what you two talk about, but whatever you think about me, it's not true."

"She's never said anything. And quit pawing me!" Ella wrenched her wrist from Matt's grip and stood up quickly. He jumped up as she turned away.

"Right. So what're all those sly little looks about, huh?"

"What little looks? Matt, you're being paranoid."

"And for a reason, yeah. You're all the same! Always whining and bitching behind people's backs. You don't care about anybody or anything but yourselves. It's a wonder you two little sluts haven't

been taken down a peg or two by now. 'Cos God knows, somebody oughta."

"Excuse me?" Ella couldn't believe what she'd just heard. Was this really the same guy she'd been talking to just two minutes ago?

"You heard me." Matt's face twisted into a sneer. "*Bitch.*"

"Matt, what's wrong with you?" Ella took a quick step back as Matt came stalking toward her. "Hey. Back off!" Ella stared hard at Matt, her eyes flashing, then deliberately turned her back on him and started marching back across the grass to the car. "That's it. I'm outta here. Deal with your issues and call me when you're done."

"You think I'd have issues if it wasn't for you girls?" Matt ran after Ella, grabbing her arm. Ella whirled and reflexively struck out at him with her free hand, catching him a glancing blow across the side of the head.

"Get off me, freak!"

Matt's eyes seemed to change from gray-blue to black in a split second. He shoved Ella backward without seeming to draw breath, sending her reeling into the blood splattered tree.

Then he pulled his knife out of his boot and stepped toward her...

Five miles away, Dr Sally Spencer sat in her booth at the busy drive-through restaurant and stared listlessly down at the burger in her hand. It was a lettuce burger—no carbs, no fat, just a plain veggie burger wrapped in lettuce leaves, following the latest fashion for not eating bread, dairy products, or anything that might possess any taste whatsoever. She had ordered it in a state of numb listlessness, realizing that her body needed food, vaguely wondering what a lettuce burger actually was.

Well, now she knew.

More specifically, she knew never to order it again.

Above the counter, the clock ticked up to 6pm Piped Elvis crackled from the radio by the cash register and the smell of burning meat wafted through from the kitchen. Sally screwed up her nose, with a shudder at the memories the smell awakened. Then she studied her

burger warily from several angles, as though it might leap up and attack her, lifting it to her mouth and gingerly biting off a piece.

It was amazing. It was just like eating cardboard. In fact, cardboard would probably have had more nutrients and tasted a whole lot better to boot. Sally took another hesitant bite, grimaced, and reached for the folded newspaper at her side to take her mind off the taste. She flicked through a couple of sections, chewing absently, then settled down to read.

After an indeterminate period, a flustered waitress came by and took her coffee cup away, silently replacing it with another. Sally didn't notice. She was engrossed in her paper and Mitchell was dead.

Sally tried reading the cartoons next, then flicked back a couple of pages to check out tonight's TV listings, which was stupid because she was a hundred miles from home.

A memory twanged in her head. Mitchell had the best TV ever—a thirty-two inch plasma screen. He'd spent nearly three months dragging her around electronics shops, while he compared prices and models, before settling on the first one he'd originally seen, satisfied that the extra money was worth it.

But now he was dead and couldn't watch TV.

She turned the page and read an article about a local guy who had just shot his wife because, he said, she had been vacuuming in a really irritating way. Sally gave a ghost of a smile. That one would have made Mitchell laugh, only he couldn't laugh because he was dead.

"Sally put down her paper with a sigh. She knew that she was already well into stage one of grieving for him—her initial shock had given way to numbness and a certain amount of disbelief. She knew this because she'd studied the grieving process for her final exams before she graduated, all those years ago and knew the symptoms off by heart. She'd even drawn a colorful chart, to help her remember them in the right order.

Right now though, she didn't give a flying fuck about what the textbooks said.

Nobody in the world had ever felt that bad before, ever.

Shaking herself, Sally picked up the paper and was about to toss it back onto the rack next to her when a small heading on the back page caught her eye. She began reading, then unfolded the paper and laid it flat on the coffee-stained table. It was a column written by a girl at the nearby high school, a humorous article about how the residents of Springwood weren't dreaming lately. Sally's brow creased into a frown as she re-read the article, then put it down and sat back in her chair, gazing thoughtfully at the paper.

It had to be a coincidence, but she wanted to be sure. She stared into space for a moment, then slipped her miniature cellphone out of her pocket and dialed a familiar number.

It rang for thirty seconds or so before Sally gave up. She clicked her phone closed and put it down on the table beside the newspaper, frowning at it.

"No reception?"

Sally glanced across to the next booth to see a skinny guy dressed in a tatty gray business suit, nodding at her sympathetically. He was balding, around forty and had an air of quiet resignation about him. Her psychiatrist's mind instantly clicked into action as she evaluated the man; either eternally single or recently divorced, owned at least one goldfish and went home every day to an immaculate, empty apartment. The kind of person who quietly and uncomplainingly greased the wheels of society and would die alone aged eighty-eight in a government retirement home, wishing desperately that he'd had more sex.

Sally shrugged in a non-committal way. "And the service sucks. It's been one of those days."

"Tell me about it." Suit Guy glanced anxiously over his shoulder, then leaned in closer toward her. "I've been waiting here forty-five minutes and they still haven't brought me my food."

"Really?" Sally glanced back at the service counter. "They bought me mine pretty quick."

Suit Guy nodded glumly. "Just my luck, I guess. What is it about me? Do I have some kind of sign over my head reading, 'Ignore Me?'"

Sally shrugged. "I get that in a lot of restaurants. I just stand there at the bar while everyone else around me gets served. It sucks."

The man's face darkened. "You shouldn't put up with it." He turned to face the restaurant. "Waitress!"

The pink-suited waitress paused, then continued serving the overweight family of five in the corner booth, several tables away from them. The pudgy three year-old sitting with his parents giggled and hurled his cutlery to the floor, earning himself a smack round the ear from his stern-looking father. He began bawling loudly.

"See? Look at that. She is ignoring me!" Suit Guy's voice rose. He turned back to the waitress. "Hey! How 'bout I get some service over here?"

This time the waitress glanced over at him, then turned back and continued writing down her order. The fat boy's crying increased several decibels in volume.

Sally saw the man's hands tighten on his menu. "Hey, don't sweat it," she said soothingly. "I'll grab her when she comes over."

"You shouldn't have to." Sally saw that the man's face was pale with sudden rage. His eyes seemed to cloud over, like a jet of black ink poured into a tank of clear water. Before she could stop him he rose to his feet. "*Hey!*" he yelled.

A hush fell over the restaurant. Diners swiveled in their seats and gawped at the man, who stood clutching his menu like a shield, staring at the waitress. Slowly, she turned around to face him.

"Yeah, bitch, I'm talking to you!" said the man. "What are you? Deaf? I've been sitting here for a whole hour. And did you even once so much as glance in my direction? No. You've just been ignoring me."

"Would you like to order?" said the waitress dryly. "No. I think I'd like to sit here for another forty minutes while you serve everyone else in the restaurant—including that guy who came in almost *half an hour* after me." Suit Guy stabbed a finger at a heavysset trucker sitting in the booth next to him, who gazed up blearily through a mouthful of pie. "*Then* I'd like you to bring me another cup of coffee to replace this one, which was cold to start with, perhaps this time without lipstick on the cup, then maybe you could wipe down my table so I don't have to worry about putting my elbow in ketchup and maybe empty my ashtray. Or is that too much to ask?"

There was a short, hot silence.

Sally stared at the man, both eyebrows raised, mentally re-evaluating him. She was impressed and also kind of scared.

Trucker Guy broke the silence. "Hey buddy, what's your problem?"

Bad move. Suit Guy turned slowly around to face him, moving as though he were being pulled by strings. "You think *I've* got a problem? Hey!" He turned back to face the rest of the diner. "He thinks I've got a problem!"

With a suddenness that made Sally jump, he slammed both his hands on the post dividing the booths and shoved his face right up into Trucker Guy's. "I'll tell you what my problem is. It's people like you, waltzing your way through life, getting served, when people like me sit here and wait patiently while you get all the coffee, all the pancakes, all the cream pies." He lashed out with his hand and sent Trucker Guy's dessert clattering to the floor. His voice dropped to a hoarse whisper, which rose steadily until he was almost shouting. "Well I'll tell you something, *buddy*. I'm all out of patience. So how's about you give me a break and get out of here, so other people can get some goddamn *food*?"

More silence. In the corner, the overweight boy stopped bawling and watched Suit Guy with sudden interest. Outside in the parking lot, a horn blared.

Trucker Guy looked at the guy in the suit. He didn't take this kind of crap from anyone—let alone some two-bit, white-collar anorexic who looked like he'd struggle to lift a case of cherry Coke. Himself, he could easily bench-press the weight of a full-grown man and still have strength left to kick his ass when he was done. So he did the only thing that came naturally.

He started to laugh.

Next thing he knew, his head hit the side of the booth as Suit Guy grabbed a handful of his hair and slammed his face into the wooden post. Shock made him freeze for just long enough for Suit Guy to get in one more good slam, then anger kicked in and he wrenched himself free, grabbing the spluttering man by the scruff of his neck. With a heave, he sent him sprawling forward onto the floor, then

lurched to his feet and towered over the floored accountant, who took the opportunity to kick him nastily in the shins.

Sally decided wisely to duck back down in her booth, as the fight raged in the diner aisle, only half aware that the cellphone in her hand was ringing. As the diner's security guard started jogging across the restaurant to separate the scrapping pair, she looked down at her phone as it rang for the eighth and final time.

Shaking her head, she flipped it open. There was a click, then a voice said, "Dr Spencer?"

"Speaking." Sally cupped a hand to the phone as a loud crash signaled the end of a corner display of soup cups. "Sorry. It's a little loud in here. Go on."

"Sheriff Williams here. We need you to come back down to the station, I'm afraid. Just more paperwork for the inquest into your partner and there's a few things we forgot to get you to sign."

"Mitchell? He wasn't my—oh, I see. Yes, yes of course. No problem at all." Sally covered the phone with a wince as the security guard flew past her, unceremoniously ejected from the melee. Families scrambling to get out of the way as cups of coffee and plates of food went flying. "What time's good for you?"

"ASAP, Ma'm. If you don't mind."

"Sure. Fine. I'll make my way over there now. Oh, and Sheriff?"

"Yes?"

"Send a squad car across to the diner at the corner of Main Street and Pier." She glanced up as there was a loud clatter. "And maybe a paramedic van."

"There's a disturbance, right?"

"You're very perceptive."

"Not really. It's been that kind of week."

Sally closed the phone and dropped it into her bag, then stood up and edged cautiously past the tussling men on the floor, heading for the open door. Something about this town just seemed to drive people crazy and if her current theory was correct, the sheriff would want to know all about her findings.

Shivering, she wrapped her jacket around herself and hurried out into the fading daylight.

Back at the station, Sheriff Williams put down the phone and sighed.

He was not having a good day. It started with that whacko kid up at Westin, going postal on his bunk mates, continued with a bunch of lunatics from the town beating the shit out of each other all day—and now it was enlivened by this woman's reports of spontaneous combustion and a talking corpse, not to mention the whole shitload of paperwork that the day's events had generated.

What was wrong with this place?

The sheriff pinched the bridge of his nose as a wave of horrendous images passed through his mind. He reached into his pocket, popped a little blue pill into his mouth and swallowed it.

Okay, he knew what was wrong with this place. But why did it always have to happen on his one day off?

The sheriff glanced around his office, taking in the general confusion and chaos, and sighed. He should've been at home, sprawled happily on the couch with a cold beer in one hand and *TV Guide* in the other, while the delicious scents of a Sunday roast wafted through from the kitchen. Then, maybe later on in the evening he'd take his long-suffering wife to the movies, followed by a drink at the Dog 'n' Ranger and a solid eight hours of sleep, to fortify him against the horrors the coming week would undoubtedly bring.

Instead, he was here, working his ass off while people he didn't even know shouted at him.

In the ten years since he'd first started working in the town, Sheriff Williams had seen so much stuff go down that he was still having a hard time understanding, or even believing. Over the last few years, in particular, he'd seen shit that would turn an LA beat cop white.

But all this shit was real and, at the end of the day, it was his responsibility. The buck stopped with him and it was his job to make sure his town was safe.

The trouble was, in this town it was one hell of a job. Some days, that applied quite literally.

The sheriff closed the blind and stood quietly in the darkened office, listening to the hubbub of voices from next door. This was a new one to him. Over the last two weeks his officers had made over sixty arrests, almost unheard in a small town like this. The suspects weren't from any particular location and ranged from a fourteen year-old kid who stabbed his teacher through the eye with a compass to an eighty-year-old grandmother who'd apparently poisoned her husband of fifty years by putting weed-killer in his soup. People were at one another's throats and most of them had no greater mitigating circumstances than that they'd "just lost it".

He took a sip of his coffee, shuddered at the taste and crossed to the other side of the room. He pulled up the blind, then tossed the mug out of the window with great relish. There was a crash of breaking crockery and the traditional shriek of a cat. He closed the sash window. It was a small gesture of frustration, but it made him feel so much better.

He should have retired years ago. He could feel it in every single aching bone in his body. He felt literally worn out, as though, if he stood too close to a bright light, people would be able to see right through him, like tissue paper.

But he still had a job to do—an important job at that.

If he left he would abdicate all control over whatever was going down and the thought terrified him more than anything else in the world. So he stayed. On some nights, though, he wished his duties would just go take a flying leap.

Almost unconsciously, he pulled the cover off the dusty TV standing in the corner and switched it on. A picture of a house came up, a live feed from one of the many street cameras creeping their way into America's towns and cities. The house was painted white, with a wooden front porch and a grassy yard out the front. It was identical to the hundreds of other middle-class homes lining the streets of Springwood, but to the sheriff, the very sight of it made a sick chill run up his spine.

The sheriff picked up a remote control unit from the desk and pushed one of the buttons. The house vanished, replaced by a cluttered living room stacked high with cardboard boxes. Nobody

was around, but it was clear from the state of the room that some kind of packing operation was under way.

Another click of the remote and a hallway was revealed, with a huge mass of clothing draped over the wooden stair rail. A large German Sheppard sat at the foot of the stairs, staring fixedly upwards.

Yet another click and a white-tiled bathroom filled the frame. The image was slightly fogged with steam, but an old woman was just visible, lying naked in the tub. There was no sound, but she was clearly singing to herself as she washed her hair, blissfully unaware that she was being watched by a total stranger on a TV set ten blocks away.

One more click. A darkened kitchen. A cellar. Then a bedroom.

Here the sheriff paused, walking closer to the set and peering intently at the image. It was a girl's room, evidenced by the abundance of shoes and underwear that covered every available surface.

The room was empty. Except for—

"Restin' up in front of the TV, sir?"

The sheriff jumped and span about, clicking off the set as he did so. He glared at the officer lurking in the doorway, a new recruit named Snood—though everyone called him Officer Snoop, on account of his uncanny ability to be in the right place at the wrong time.

Sheriff Williams regained his composure almost as quickly as he had lost it. "Is there anything I can help you with, Snoo—uh, Snood?"

"We could use a hand next door, sir," said Snood, utterly unfazed. He lifted the big curtain blind that screened the office's main window and jerked his head toward it. Outside, the waiting room was filled with people, all clamoring for attention. All his staff were out on urgent calls, leaving just two officers to man the besieged office. Officer Dewy was fending off a barrage of questions by one obviously very angry woman, while, in the corner, a two hundred pound trucker who the sheriff presumed was her husband was trying to remove Officer Lopez's head with just one hand, the other being chained to the leg of a heavy steel desk.

As Sheriff Williams watched, the leg gave way and the whole desk pitched sideways. Heaped papers and potted plants crashed to the floor as the other hand, now freed, grabbed Officer Lopez's neck and started to choke the life out of him.

Sighing, Sheriff Williams nodded to Officer Snood to drop the blind. Pulling open his desk drawer, he picked up his gun and went to restore the peace.

Snood's jaw fell open. "Um, sir?" he said.

Williams ignored him. Kicking open the door, he stared into the chaotic room, then pointed his pistol at the ceiling.

The gunshot was deafening. All noise was instantly replaced by a ringing silence. "Everybody be quiet!" he yelled.

After a good five seconds had passed, someone said, "Sir?"

Sheriff Williams glanced to his left to see Officer Dewy cowering behind a desk, "What is it, Dewy?" he snapped.

The officer pointed mutely to the gun that the sheriff still held aloft. "Um... don't think we're s'posed to discharge our firearms in public, sir," he mumbled, then added, "With all due respect."

Williams lowered the gun and frowned, tucking it away in the waistband of his pants. "Sorry," he said. "I just los..."

His frown deepened.

"Sir? Are you alright?" Snood peered timidly through from the sheriff's office.

Williams turned back to address the room. "Everyone shut up and sit down!" he shouted, blustering to cover his confusion. All around the room, frightened people scuttled for the chairs.

Still frowning, the sheriff went back into his office, laid his gun on the desk and stared at it hard. Then he reached into his top breast pocket and pulled out a piece of folded paper. It was crumpled and torn, stained with what looked like barbeque sauce. He unfolded it and gave a deep sigh that came from the very core of his being.

Then he picked up the phone, glanced at the paper and started dialing the number he'd hoped he would never have to call again.

FIVE

Three miles away, the last rays of the setting sun washed over the outskirts of Springwood. It sparkled in Matt's eyes as he stared at Ella, who was frozen in place, staring down at the knife in his hand. She backed up a couple of steps, fear engulfing her as she saw the cold, empty look in Matt's eyes. She fought it back with an effort.

"Matt! What the hell's wrong with you?"

No reply.

Ella gave a yelp as Matt suddenly unfroze and lunged at her, his knife slashing upwards at her face. She blocked the blow awkwardly with her forearm, more out of luck than skill. She ducked under his reach and tried to spin away from him, but she was a fraction of a second too slow. Her eyes widened in alarm as she saw Matt's fist let loose a savage blow. She threw herself hurriedly to the side, his fist connecting with the tree behind her head.

Ella seized the opportunity to make a frantic bolt for freedom, only for Matt's booted foot to sweep her feet from beneath her. She landed awkwardly in the long grass and felt a stab of pain, as something inside her elbow crunched. Still, she used the momentum of her fall to roll herself back over, springing to her feet in one smooth motion. She faced Matt, the look of fury on her face stopping him in his tracks.

They stood mere feet apart, panting, glaring at one another.

Matt's hand came up as he wiped at the thin trickle of blood running down the side of his face. He took a breath, his eyes glittering furiously. "You'd better run, you filthy little tramp."

Ella opened her mouth to protest.

"Do it!" Matt snarled.

Ella didn't need to be told twice. Something in Matt's voice hotwired her survival instincts and she ran hard for the road. He watched her go, his eyes hard and cold.

Sniveling little bitch. He'd sure shown *her*.

After a while he folded the knife back into its case and stowed it carefully on the inside of his boot. Then his head drooped down to

his chest and he fell back until he touched the big tree, its bark still warm from the afternoon sun.

Matt gazed after the fleeing figure of Ella. What was it about girls that made him so crazy?

A muscle in his jaw twitched. After a few seconds he kicked out his legs in front of him and flopped down onto the grass. He leaned back against the tree, stretching his arms into the air and rubbing again at the side of his head where Ella had hit him.

"Bitch," he muttered to nobody in particular.

To his surprise, he felt tears welling in his eyes. He wiped them away angrily with the back of his hand.

The light shifted, the warmth of the evening draining rapidly out of the air as the sun dipped beneath the horizon, throwing weird shadows over the distant hills. Matt gazed moodily around as night stole over the land, but felt no inclination to move. He closed his eyes and leaned his head back against the tree. Flickering images danced behind his eyelids. Matt grunted and rubbed at his eyes.

He was just so damn tired.

A picture of Ella swam, unbidden, into his head. She was an airheaded little slut, but would probably be a good lay if he ever had the time or the inclination. She was no beauty, like the sorority girls he usually hung out with, but those full lips of hers would definitely be an asset.

Matt smiled to himself, eyes shut, entertained by the image. As he daydreamed, the tree behind him began to silently crack apart. The bark opened up down the length of its trunk, as though invisible knives were slowly slicing it apart. Thick droplets of blood started to ooze out of the cracks, until the entire upper trunk was coated with the stuff. The blood rose up the trunk then traveled down the uppermost branches and began oozing out of the stems of the leaves, trickling from the buds and blossoms, falling downward like fine rain, vanishing just inches above the ground.

Matt was still preoccupied with thoughts of Ella naked when he felt a hand stroke his hair. His eyes flew open.

"Ella?"

"Hey," she stepped out from behind the tree, smiling softly.

Matt's brow creased in confusion. "What?"

"Shhh." Ella put a warm finger over his mouth. She gazed thoughtfully into his eyes as he goggled up at her, then leaned forward to press a lingering kiss on his lips. Matt kissed her back, his confusion rapidly dissolving into a warm haze of enjoyment as Ella's supple hands wound through his hair, caressing his face and running teasingly down his neck. Any thoughts as to why she had come back vanished from his mind as a sudden wave of desire swept through him. Abruptly, he reached up and grabbed Ella's hand, pulling her down into his lap.

Ella kissed him back and then pulled away breathlessly, gazing down at him with a look of unmistakable lust in her eyes. Wordlessly, she reached down and scooped up the hem of her top, then in one swift move pulled it off over her head.

She wasn't wearing a bra. Matt gave a silent prayer of thanks to whatever deity might be responsible for this unexpected miracle. She smiled down at him, her slender figure backlit by the orange glow of the sky and the lingering remains of the day.

Matt drank her in for a couple of moments, then leaned forward to touch her, running a wandering hand up the smooth skin of her flank, across her taut, flat stomach, to gently stroke and cup her perfect breasts. She seemed beautiful to him, perfection itself, her skin seemingly lit from within by the soft light of the dying sunset. The expression on her face made Matt catch his breath.

Something in his scrambled brain kicked at him, and Matt paused, frowning. "Aren't you mad at me? We just—"

"Why should I be?" Ella's voice was light, teasing. "I was a bitch. You were right to get mad at me. I deserved it."

"It's just weird to hear you say it."

"Hey, I'm a woman. I'm stupid, right? Only good for one thing." Ella gave a little titter, then trailed her hand down Matt's chest, tilting her head to one side as her smile died away. "I know you want me."

Matt gulped, trying to sit up. "I... uh... how did you—?"

Ella leaned in toward him, silencing him with a kiss and lowering herself onto him so that she was lying on him full length, arching her

body against his like a cat. Matt kissed her back with great enthusiasm, making a noise of protest as she suddenly pulled herself away from him.

"What's wrong?"

"I've been thinking." Ella gave a coy smile, looking up at him from under heavy lashes. "We should tell the guys about those papers we found."

"But I thought you said—"

"C'mon. This is major league stuff. They should know." She reached down and pulled Matt's cellphone out of his jeans pocket. She handed it to him, trailing her fingers playfully across his stomach. "Call them for me?"

"Now?"

"Now."

Ella watched Matt as he first dialed Henry, then Jen, and told them what they had found. At length he clicked off the phone and slid it back into his pocket. "Satisfied?"

"Very." Ella smiled and stroked her hand down the side of Matt's face. He beamed up at her, mentally punching the air as she began unbuttoning his jeans.

He scratched his nails lazily up her flank, then his smile turned to a frown as he felt something warm begin to trickle beneath his fingers. He raised himself slightly on an elbow and peered down at Ella's back.

To his shock, he saw bloody wounds had opened up where he had gently scratched her. "What the?"

"Hmm?"

"Shit! Oh Ella, I'm sorry! I didn't mean to..." Matt reached in his pocket for a tissue and tried to staunch the flow of blood. To his alarm, it seemed to make things worse. He lifted her up to reach her back and stop the bleeding, then gave a gasp of horror. The fingers of one hand passed right through her skin, like a knife through warm butter.

Matt pulled away in shock as blood began spurting from the twin wounds, pulsing with the beat of Ella's heart. "Holy shit! What are you? A hemophiliac or something?"

Ella pulled back from him so that he could see her face. To his surprise, her expression was completely blank. If he had hurt her, she didn't show it.

"I'm fine," she said calmly. "What's up?"

"Your back! You're bleeding like a stuck pig, girl!" Matt tried to push Ella away from him, whimpering in fright as his fingers slid through her flesh like it was wet tissue paper. Blood flowed thickly across his hands. "Jeez! What's wrong with you?"

"Nothing's *wrong* with me. Now, where were we?"

Ella leaned closer toward him, blood flowing down her flanks in a river. Matt convulsively grabbed her by the shoulders, trying to hold her back. To his horror, the skin of her arm suddenly tore with wet ripping sound. Matt saw that the flesh underneath was charred like that of a burns victim. He let go of her with a yell, trying to push her off him. She was surprisingly heavy. Matt scrabbled at her, crying out in fear as her skin came off in great wet lumps wherever he touched her, her blood pouring down and soaking his jeans.

With a mad burst of effort Matt threw her off him, then scrambled to his feet and whirled to face her, sweating. Ella gazed at him with an ominous expression. Her skin was torn in a multitude of places, the burned flesh underneath gleaming in the dying light.

"Your skin—I didn't mean to..."

Ella started to laugh, her voice echoing eerily back from the empty landscape. Then she reached up and grasped the flap of skin he'd torn off her neck. In one quick move she ripped it open down the middle of her body, stepping out of her own skin as though it were nothing more than a theatrical costume.

She stood before him, the exposed pink muscles of her naked, charred body glistening in the blue light of dusk. Her burnt lips curved upwards into a sickly parody of a smile, then she said one word, strange harmonics distorting her voice: "Run."

Matt didn't need to be told twice. He turned and ran, as fast and as hard as he could.

He flew across the field, the long grass whipping at his legs and thorns scratching his ankles. He saw the welcome shape of his car parked up on the highway and ran frantically toward it.

Then the air hummed and the landscape in front of him suddenly expanded, zooming away from him as though he were looking down the wrong end of the telescope. Matt cried out in frustration as the car flew away from him, quickly becoming a tiny red dot in the distance. The faster Matt ran, the further away the car seemed to be.

"Shit!"

He threw a panicked glance over his shoulder, and shrieked in fright as he saw the burned apparition of Ella striding calmly toward him through the long grass, her eyes fixed unwaveringly on his. She was almost upon him, her blackened, bloodstained fingers reaching out for him.

Matt lost it. Before he had time to think about what he was doing, he lunged and kicked Ella—or the monster she had become—as hard as he could in the stomach. The creature howled and Matt whimpered as his foot sunk up to the ankle in the pulpy mess of its belly. He wrenched himself free, gibbering in fear and started running as hard as he could in the opposite direction.

A strange metallic hum made his head snap around. As he watched, the Ella-thing plunged its hands into the earth, her eyes still fixed on his. A shining wave of molten metal poured out of her fingers and flowed across the landscape toward him in a silver tide, turning everything it touched to shining steel.

A forest of waving, glinting, razor-sharp knives sprang up, as every leaf, every flower, every blade of grass, turned to deadly spikes.

And it was all heading straight toward him.

The Ella-monster's high-pitched laughter filled the air. Matt threw a panicked glance over his shoulder and saw the wave of knives just a couple dozen feet away. There was a squeak as a rabbit flew up into the air in a spray of blood, impaled on a thicket of knives that just a moment ago had been a leafy bush.

A moment later, Matt's feet found the bank that lead to the highway and he scrambled up it with a sob of relief. A narrow drainage gully separated him from the car, and, with a last, fearful glance, he took a running jump and launched himself into space, flying across the ditch toward the car.

He never made it. An invisible force slammed into him and grabbed him, yanking him up into the air as though he had a dozen helium balloons attached to each foot. Matt watched in disbelief as the ground dropped away from him, spinning sickeningly. Within seconds he was a hundred feet up, then two, then three...

This has to be a dream, he told himself desperately. Vertigo gripped him and the wind whistled in his ears as he shot upwards, kicking and struggling. The landscape spread out beneath him in a checkerboard pattern of fields, the highway winding its way through them. His car was a tiny red dot beneath him, and within moments he saw the spreading bloom of silver reach his car and engulf it.

A desperate idea struck him. He pulled out his cellphone and hastily dialed a familiar number.

Bad move. As the phone began ringing, the spell shattered.

He began to fall.

Matt let loose a scream of raw fear as the sharp metallic forest came spinning up to meet him.

Then there was an awful, wet *thud*.

Then silence.

A pair of booted feet stepped up to Matt's devastated remains. The solid silver grass around them shimmered, then liquified and gurgled back into the ground, like mercury going down the drain.

Freddy Krueger peeled off the last remaining shreds of Ella-skin clinging to him, then idly prodded the corpse of Matt with his toe. His body was split open like a beached wale, impaled on a dozen of the larger silver spikes that grew from the ground like living things. "Hey, kid!" he said. "Hope you're not all cut up about this."

He sniggered and raised his demonic gaze to the dimming horizon. Night was falling and the first stars were just beginning to glimmer in the blueblack sky. Soon, Springwood would be asleep.

But not dreaming.

Something was wrong, and, although Freddy didn't understand what, he sure as hell intended to find out what. But first, he had a call

to make.

He waved a hand toward Matt's remains. The spikes withdrew with a sucking sound and the corpse rolled the rest of the way down the hill into a ditch. The long grass waved although there was no breeze, then flowed over the body, weaving its stalks together and hiding it from view.

Nodding briskly in satisfaction, Freddy found where Matt's cellphone lay, half-hidden in a clump of razor-wire brambles. It was still ringing.

A female voice answered the phone on the other end. "Hello?"

Freddy took a deep breath, drawing the night air into his undead lungs, then began to change again. His body turned to black smoke and spiraled inward like a tornado. It swirled toward the phone and was sucked into the earpiece.

A brief cackle of tinny laughter echoed. Then flames, licked up from the phone, engulfing it. Within minutes it was nothing more than a circle of melted plastic, smoldering lightly under the stars.

SIX

Nikki stormed into her bedroom, slammed the door and flounced down onto the bed.

What a day!

First there had been that horrible stand-in teacher during fifth period, who dissed her because of her piercings. She only had a couple, but Mrs Jenkins had looked at her like she had snakes stuck through her lobes and had forced her to take them out. So, having more than three earrings was too much?

Then the people who were supposed to be her friends had made fun of her, right to her face. For no reason other than she liked to dress a little differently to most people.

Fine. She was tough. She could deal with it. But, as the rain lashed her window, Nikki began to cry.

When she was done, she blew her nose loudly on a tissue and sniffed. Then she reached out and flicked a switch on the stereo mounted above her bed. Heavy metal blared out, an upbeat track by her favourite band, Death By Spaghetti. She cranked the volume, then got up off her bed, wandering across to the big cage on the wall to give her pet myna bird a fresh pot of seed. Then, with some effort, she pulled a canvas out from behind the curtain. It was her latest work in progress, a piece entitled *The Last Dance*.

It depicted two figures, a man and a woman, dressed in roughly-drawn Elizabethan costumes and outlined in swirling shades of thick black and red paint, into which she had stuck broken glass and razor blades. They were dancing, the woman dangling from the man's arms with an expression of rapture on her face. The man was laughing, a knife held behind his back.

Nikki was very proud of it—and of the sharp hardware, the iron nails and everything, that adorned it.

She squeezed some more black paint from a rolled-up tube onto her easel and dipped her brush into it, then got to work.

After a while, there was a knock on the door. "Honey?"

Ella dived across her room and killed the music, then dropped her brush and ran to the door. She reached out for the door handle, then caught herself at the last second and ripped the white bandage off her wrist.

The skin underneath it was smooth and unblemished.

Nikki rubbed furtively at her wrist for a moment, then opened the door to reveal her mother, a large, apple-cheeked woman with bottle-blond hair and a floral print dress. The smell of cooking and flowery perfume drifted in with her. "Supper's ready, honey," she said.

Nikki did her best not to scowl. "Cool. I'll be down in five."

"Ooh, and I hired a video for you. We can watch it together after we've eaten."

"What did you get?"

"One of your favorites. *Pride and Prejudice*."

"Oh." Nikki's scowl deepened.

Yeah, my favorite when I was like, ten.

When she was younger, she had believed in all that stuff. She had wasted precious years believing that life was so much better back in a time when everything was clean and wholesome, life was simple, and romance wasn't dead and buried in an unmarked grave.

Now, she just thought it was stupid.

She looked up at her mother. "Thanks," she said dryly.

"I picked up some more paint for you today," her mom said, completely missing her sarcasm. "And that art kit you wanted." Her mother held out a rustling plastic bag from the local store. "You can pay me back when you become a rich and famous artist." She smiled happily, beaming down at her daughter.

"You didn't have to do that." Nikki took the bag, and stood in the doorway awkwardly.

Just leave...

"Oh, and your father says to hurry up if you've got any laundry. He's just doing a load before bed. Gotta be all clean for Mass tomorrow morning." Mom beamed at her brightly, with the dazed, half-conscious expression of one who watches too many daytime soaps

"Sure, whatever." Nikki started to close the door, only to find it jammed by her mother's hand. She sighed and reopened it. "What?"

"Nikki, honey?" her mother seemed uncomfortable. "Is—is everything alright? Only, you didn't eat your packed lunch today, and, and I found this in your satchel when I was cleaning it." She held up a book entitled *Dealing with Divorce*.

"Oh. Someone gave it to me—I mean, for my homework. It's a class we're taking in school," Nikki lied.

"Oh. That's nice, dear." Her mother folded her arms and beamed at Nikki. "We're so proud of you, pumpkin. You're settling in so nicely."

"Thanks, Mom." Nikki snatched the book and tossed it onto her bed, muttering under her breath.

"Better go wash up now. Wouldn't want dinner to get cold."

"Will do," Nikki smiled through clenched teeth.

Her mother disappeared, humming happily to herself, and Nikki closed the door and leaned against it.

That was close.

Her eyes traversed the room. The drummer of Death By Spaghetti seemed to stare down from her poster accusingly. "What?" she asked him, as though daring him to get down off the wall.

"Proud of you, pumpkin!" her myna bird chirped from its cage, cheerily swinging on its perch.

"And you can shut up, too," she told it.

Nikki reached down and retrieved the white bandage from the floor. Slowly, she rolled it back up and slipped it into her pocket, all the while listening for sounds of her mother, in case she decided to come back up again and bring some freshly-baked cookies.

She sighed. That was the problem with her family. It was just that they were so... nice.

Ordinary.

Boring.

Nikki tucked the ends of the bandage in, then fastened it with a safety pin. Her expression was distant. Once upon a time she had been happy, until she had hit high school where it was no longer *cool* to be happy. The other kids were all into nu-punk and goth-rap and

death-metal, and, after enduring months of teasing, Nikki had decided to change. Her copy of *Pride and Prejudice* had gone into the trash, along with her pretty cotton dresses and her carefully shined shoes. Her transformation had started with a couple of studded bracelets, carefully concealed under the long sleeves of her school sweater, then, as her confidence had grown, she had added more punk jewelry, bought herself some big Frankenstein-style goth boots with about a year's worth of her allowance and started experimenting with makeup.

The stories had come next. Everyone else talked so casually about their alcoholic uncle or their cousin who did drugs, so it was only a small step for Nikki to join in the tough talk and pretend that her own life wasn't all peaches and cream either.

The stories she made up at school about her family made her feel special. Perhaps she had gone a little overboard, swept up in the fun of it all, but she loved the way people looked at her when she talked about her mother's overdose, her father's latest room-wrecking tantrum, or her sprained wrist from when her folks got drunk and pushed her down the stairs. The attention she received was wonderful. Even better than that, everyone suddenly seemed to care about her.

That was the best feeling in the world. And the bullying had stopped. She was officially cool. She had finally got a life.

Okay, it wasn't her real life. And true, she had to field the odd do-gooder who tried to get her to call a social worker. And it did mean that she could never invite any friends home for fear of them finding out the truth.

But it was a small price to pay for her own strange brand of notoriety. It wasn't better than genuine popularity. But it was heaps better than obscurity.

Nikki glowered at the closed door, lost in thought. So what if it was all a lie? Nobody would ever find out. The goth clothing all came off before she went home and the holes from her new piercings were carefully hidden under her hair. Her mother could never know, for fear that she would tell a teacher—or worse, her friends—and put a stop to it all.

And then they would all make fun of her.

For as every school kid knew, if there was one thing worse than being teased for not fitting in, it was being teased for trying to fit in.

If that happened, she may as well slit her wrists and be done with it.

Nikki wandered across her room and sat down on the edge of her bed. When her guilt had subsided a little, she reached into her bag and pulled out a plastic-wrapped makeup kit. It was entitled "Special Effects Makeup" and featured a lurid picture of an accident victim on the front, covered in scars and gore.

Cool.

She would only do a little scar to start with, but it would lend her story further authenticity if anyone asked to see the wound under her bandage. The girls were all too polite to ask, but the boys always wanted to see, because they were gross like that.

And then after supper, she'd start on her new project.

Nikki pulled out a big reel of white bandage from her desk drawer and put it on top of a pile of folded clothes she'd picked out for Jen's party tomorrow night. She'd show her. When Jen saw what her father had done to her for even daring to ask if she could go to her stupid party, she'd probably offer to drive her home herself, to make up for being so mean to her earlier.

Smiling grimly to herself, Nikki carefully covered up her painting, then opened the window to let the paint fumes out. Then she went to have dinner with her family.

Pride and Prejudice. Eugh.

As the breeze blew in through the open window, Nikki's myna bird hopped from perch to perch, fluffing up its feathers and enjoying the fresh air.

After a few minutes, the white sheet covering Nikki's painting started to flap around madly in the breeze. The sheet stuck to the wet canvas, red paint seeping through in a rapidly growing patch. More paint started flowing out from underneath it, dripping down onto the

floor in a steady stream. A strange sound came from beneath the sheet, like thick fabric being slowly torn.

The myna bird cocked its head and trilled nervously, its shiny black eyes fixed unwaveringly on the sheet.

Then it took fright and flapped into the air as the sheet exploded outwards, torn into shreds by the five razor-sharp knives that slashed through the canvas.

The myna cowered back, panting uncomprehendingly, as the knives reached out toward the bird cage.

A few moments later, all was still again. A single feather drifted downward and landed on top of the remains of the sheet. The painting was revealed, dimly visible in the moonlight.

But, the picture had altered. The figure of the woman lay on the floor at the bottom of the frame, her carefully painted dress ruined by a jagged hole that punched right through the canvas. Red paint streamed out of it, trickling onto the ground.

Drip. Drip. Drip...

The man in the painting suddenly moved, stretching his arm out of the picture frame into the room. He slowly drew it back, wiping his blades on the painting's frame, scraping the blood off.

Then he smiled, his eyes flickering toward the door.

On the floor, the torn body of the myna bird stirred. Its beak creaked open and air hissed out.

"One-two-coming for you..."

As the moon rose, Jacob slept.

His eyes flickered beneath their closed lids as he slumbered in his cot in the secure holding cell, deep in the bowels of Westin Hills. He stirred in his sleep, rolling over and moaning slightly, ghostly images dancing across his brain. Outside his locked door, a bored night warden paced back and forth, idly running his nightstick along the walls and rattling it rhythmically against the doors.

Step, step—tap, tap...

Step, step, step—tap, tap, tap...

The sound deepened and slowed in Jacob's mind until it became a metallic heartbeat, pulsing in his ears. The blackness before his eyes softened and lit up in shades of deep crimson and purple. The sedative the warden had given him flowed through his veins, relaxing his muscles.

Jacob relaxed deeper and deeper, feeling as though he was falling, falling, falling...

After what felt like an infinitely long period of time, he noticed a tiny point of light appear in the murky darkness. It nagged at him like a mosquito and he closed his eyes tighter in an attempt to shut it out. But the harder he squeezed them shut, the brighter it grew.

After a minute, Jacob relented and opened one eye.

He was held suspended in some kind of liquid. A warm red glow flooded his senses and he realized, after a moment of panic, that he wasn't breathing, but that it seemed not to matter. His own left arm floated in front of him, tiny and wrinkled, and he watched it with interest for a moment. Jacob tried to move his head. A heartbeat thudded rhythmically in the background, but it was so much a part of him that he had to concentrate hard in order to notice it.

At once, he realized that he was dreaming, Dreaming that he was a fetus.

Great. What fucking drug had they put him on this time?

The point of light was starting to annoy him. His eyes felt overly sensitive, as though he hadn't slept in a month. As it got closer he blinked painfully and tried to shield his eyes, but his tiny fetal hand only twitched and wouldn't do what he wanted it to.

Finally, the light was far too bright for him to ignore it. Jacob opened his eyes and peered warily at it.

Two eyes stared right back at him.

He jumped in his sleep, his bare feet kicking outwards in fright, but he didn't wake up. He couldn't wake up.

He was trapped in sleep by the sedative.

He stared at the apparition, freaking out. A glowing white face floated before him, the skull just visible under the weirdly translucent skin, which was stretched tight as a drum over the gleaming white bone. There was no neck, no limbs, no body—just a

freaky skeletal tail attached directly to the head, like a glowing human comet.

Only the eyes were normal. They were coral blue, fringed with thick black lashes. Jacob realized instinctively what it was.

It was a human soul.

The mouth moved and in his horrified state it took Jacob a moment to realize that the thing was trying to communicate with him. He peered closer.

"Help—me..."

The creature mouthed the words over and over, like a mantra.

Jacob's fear melted away as he gained an understanding: the thing was terrified.

He tried to reach out to it, but, as he did, light streamed out of the soul as it dissolved into Jacob's amniotic fluid, which bubbled and hissed as though it were boiling. A look of abject terror entered the thing's eyes. In under a minute it melted away to almost nothing. Only the eyes remained, locked with Jacob's, pleading helplessly until the end

Then it was gone, leaving only a naked point of light at its heart—which fizzed for a moment, then zipped toward Jacob as though attracted by a magnet. It struck him in the stomach, entering his umbilical cord and flooding him with black heat as it dissolved into his bloodstream. Suddenly, a feeling of power filled Jacob's being.

"Hope you're hungry, my boy."

The voice was muffled, but still recognizable.

In the womb, Jacob's tiny hands were clenched, his match head-sized fingernails digging into his palms in fury.

Krueger.

The bastard was here, in the very place where Jacob was supposed to be safest.

He opened his mouth to try to reply, but no sound came out. Thick amniotic fluid filled his mouth and his lungs, thick and cloying like coppery treacle. He tried to spit it out, to draw in a breath to shout, but only succeeded in swallowing more fluid. He hissed impotently, his little body shaking in fury.

The now familiar laughter sounded in his head, "Gotta feed you up, kid, make you big and strong."

Another point of light sparked into being high above Jacob, and started floating down toward him.

Then another.

And another.

Jacob realized what was happening. Freddy was active again. He was killing and feeding Jacob the souls of the kids he had victimized.

And there was nothing he could do to stop it.

In the womb, Jacob opened his mouth and screamed soundlessly. As he did so he felt himself moving forward, as though drawn by a magnet. Then suddenly he was above himself, looking down. He gazed down at his own tiny, defenseless little body and a chill rushed through him. He looked so small, so weak. The souls Freddy was feeding to him made him glow like a light bulb, beams of white light emanating from his body like deadly radiation.

As he looked closer, the Jacob-fetus opened its eyes and howled. Its eyes were a slick blood red, devoid of pupils, malevolent, its teeth yellow and rotting. A moment later its tiny fists unclenched and razor-sharp silver knives burst from the end of its fingers.

Jacob screamed...

And woke up.

He lay still in the darkness while his heart thudded wildly in his chest, squeezing his eyes tight shut and fighting off the clinging disorientation. It was pitch black in the cell, but he was warm and safe, and felt surprisingly comfortable, as though he were in a feather bed in a five-star hotel rather than the holding cell of a psychiatric ward. It was so dark that he had no way of telling what time of night it was. He tried to breathe deeply as the terror of his dream left him. The air was stale, as though he were in a room that hadn't been opened in a week.

A flicker of green light above him caught his attention. He tried to focus on it, but it was strangely blurred. A quiet beeping sound

filtered through to him, muted as if it was heard from underwater.

Then light flooded his cell as the main door swung open. Jacob tried to shield his eyes from the glare, but his arm was too heavy to move. He tried again, his arm slowly drifting toward his face as if in slow motion.

He looked down at his hand, flexing his fingers. They were normalized. He wasn't a fetus any more. In his drugged state this struck him as almost hysterically funny. He started giggling, then stopped, perplexed, as no sound reached his ears.

Before he could make sense of it, the light flickered as a person came into view. Jacob blinked, struggling to focus through eyes blurred with sleep. Something was wrong here. The figure was the wrong way up, walking toward him horizontally with its feet on the side wall.

Jacob stared, then looked down at himself and realized what was wrong.

He wasn't lying down. He was somehow standing upright.

His vision was still blurry. Jacob rubbed at his eyes irritably, then squeezed them tight shut and opened them again. No good. He still couldn't focus.

The light flickered again and three other figures followed the first into the room. They were dressed in white, one of them holding what Jacob recognized as a clipboard. Voices sounded in Jacob's ears, muffled, far away.

"What's wrong with him? Dial's all lit up like a Christmas tree."

"Look at his heart rate. It's going off the scale."

"He can't be dreaming. It's not possible." The figure reached out to the piece of machinery with the flashing lights on it. "He get his meds tonight?"

"We doubled the dosage."

Jacob squinted at the first figure. It was so blurred that it would be impossible to tell whether it was a man or a woman if the voice wasn't so definitely male and so very familiar.

Jacob opened his mouth to speak, but no sound came out. He cleared his throat and tried again, with the same result.

The leading figure leaned forward and peered at him, cupping his hand against the darkened glass. "He's awake. Shit."

"Turn up the gas. Quick. The boss'll be here in a minute."

The male figure reached out and flicked a switch set into the side of the tank. A hissing sound filled the silence, unnaturally loud in the still air of the tank.

Jacob brought his hand up to his face and his fingers touched plastic.

He was wearing a breathing mask.

He ran his fingers over it. The mask covered his entire face, with a glass screen for his eyes and a rubber tube at the bottom, through which fresh air slowly hissed. He moved his hand in front of his face again, watching the way it moved.

He was suspended in a tank of water.

What the fuck?

As Jacob watched, the leading figure moved in closer to the tank and tapped on the glass, peering in him. The figure wore a snap-brimmed hat. Orange eyes glinted maliciously in the darkness, and then water began rushing down his breathing tube, filling his mask.

Suddenly, there was no air. He couldn't breathe. Jacob waved at the other figures frantically, but they ignored him, busy writing on their clipboards. Water crammed itself into his nose, his mouth, then started rushing down his esophagus, sucking down into his lungs.

Jacob started to drown...

Then woke up again.

With a yell, he leaped out of bed, flailing, and landed on the cold concrete floor of the cell. He skidded on the floor and nearly overbalanced, catching himself at the last moment, choking and coughing. Like a cornered animal Jacob span and glanced around him wildly, to the left and right.

Concrete walls. Bars on the window. A small, military-style bed. A featureless, steel door. Through the wall, he could hear a phone ringing somewhere, the sound sharp and discordant.

Jacob's senses reeled and he threw out a hand to steady himself, his fingers closing around the metal bedstead. It felt reassuringly firm beneath his fingers. He was soaking wet, sweat drenching his ward nightgown.

He held out his hands and looked down at them. He was shaking like a girl.

Christ, this was so, so bad. If Freddy had found a way to get through to him, even while he was taking the Hypnocil, he was screwed. How could he possibly be dreaming again?

How? The Hypnocil was supposed to prevent it! He'd been taking it for five years and hadn't had a single dream.

Until last night.

When he killed four people...

Impossible.

But unavoidably true.

The full force of what it meant hit Jacob and he sagged down onto the bed, trembling. If Freddy could get through to him, then it was only a matter of time before more people started dying.

Jacob realized he had to get out of there, fast. But how? Getting out of Westin Hills was hard enough, although he heard it had been done before. That little girl had managed it a couple of weeks ago. What was her name? Sarah? She'd vanished without trace one night and for a while the inmates had gotten excited, talking about the possibility of escape. But now security had been tightened once again. Jacob knew he was the responsibility of at least three well-trained guards and he wouldn't be surprised if there was a cop or two out there. He was alone and unarmed—what could he possibly do to fight them?

Okay, focus.

First up, he needed a weapon, something sharp. If he had surprise on his side, he might stand a chance.

Jacob got up off the bed and began pacing the room. His holding cell was ten feet square, if that. It had an ugly plaster ceiling and that same godawful plain green linoleum they used all the way through this damn place.

Come on, come on. Gimme something.

Jacob went over to the window, tugging hard on the bars. Then he went to the door and ran a questing hand all the way over it, from top to bottom. No seams, no joins, nothing he could work with. But if he could lay his hands on a piece of metal, maybe he could wedge it into the lock, try to pick it from the inside. His mother had taught him how to do that. Being paranoid sometimes had its uses...

Jacob looked down at the bed frame. He sat down on it and bounced thoughtfully. Then he hopped up and pulled the mattress back.

Crap!

The springs had been welded into place.

Jacob tossed the mattress onto the floor in disgust, and was about to start tugging on the springs when he heard a clattering noise.

He looked down. The black shape of a gun lay at his feet.

Jacob's heart thumped. He reached down cautiously and picked it up, his mind searching for an explanation.

Kane.

The name dropped into Jacob's mind before he'd had a chance to think rationally. Kane had given him a gun. But why? He'd just killed four of his ward-mates. What the hell was Kane thinking?

The rational part of Jacob's mind shut down and his instincts took over. Screw asking questions, he'd think about it later. All he had to do now was to figure out how best to use the gun.

He tipped his head to one side, considering the door. He could try blasting the lock out, but if that didn't work he'd only attract unwanted attention, and then it'd be all over for him.

Moving as quietly as he could, Jacob pulled the mattress back up onto the bed, dragged the sheet and pillow back up on top of it, and slipped the gun under the pillow. Then he walked calmly up to the door, stepped back and dealt it a cracking roundhouse kick, just once.

Clang! The sound of impact echoed through the room. Jacob rebounded and staggered backward a couple of paces. Then he waited, his eyes fixed on the barred window.

After a moment, the dark shape of a night warden materialized. The man peered in, backlit by the buzzing yellow strip light behind

him. He was in his mid-thirties, wore a warden's cap backward and had bags under his eyes. He did not look amused.

Jacob moved toward the window and the guard stepped back, suspicion narrowing his beady little eyes. "Hey, you! Pipe down!" he bellowed. "You want to sleep in cuffs tonight?"

Jacob gazed back at him thoughtfully, as if considering this. He turned and started to walk back toward the bed, then turned at the last minute and ran full-tilt at the door, smashing into it shoulder first, just once. The doorframe quivered under the impact.

"All right. That's enough, sonny! I'm comin' in. Time for your meds."

As keys jangled in the door, Jacob quickly ran back to the bed. His hands slid under the pillow and closed around the cold shape of the gun.

Then he waited.

With a piercing squeak, the door to his cell swung open. Jacob listened intently as the warden marched toward him, a set of cuffs dangling from his hand.

Jacob waited until the footsteps were nearly upon him.

Next door in the office, the phone began ringing again.

Once.

Twice.

Three times.

Four ti—

Jacob brought up his gun and fired. Just once.

SEVEN

The next day, Ella sat at her desk in the Student's Union in a daze. She stared down at the bright white notepad in front of her as sunlight streamed through the half-open blinds. Another day, another report.

Ella sighed, then pulled back the cuff of her shirt and peeked at her battered wristwatch. Ten to two. Nearly the end of lunch break and she hadn't written a word.

Mr Gibson would really kill her this time.

She rubbed her eyes and yawned for what felt like the hundredth time that morning. The sounds of running and shouting filtered through the closed window from outside, but the noise was strangely muted, as if coming through a thick layer of cotton wool. The sunlight from outside hurt her eyes, and after a moment's thought she reached back and pulled the blind down. Then she put down her pen and shook herself, opened her eyes wide then rubbed at them. Her brain was fuzzy and there was a high-pitched ringing in her ears. She just couldn't seem to focus. She felt distant and irritable, and the unwritten five hundred words in front of her seemed impossibly out of reach.

What was wrong with her? She'd gone to bed in good time last night and slept a good nine hours, but still didn't feel refreshed.

She typed three words, stared blankly at the screen and then deleted them again. She had been doing this for the best part of an hour and it wasn't getting any easier.

Sighing, Ella pushed her keyboard away from her, then reached into her schoolbag and pulled out her notebook. She flipped it open and turned the pages until she found her half-finished pencil drawing of Wolverine. She glanced furtively around her, then grabbed a pencil from the pot on her desk and started working on it.

Her irritation faded away as she scribbled in some shading down the side of Wolverine's chest. A couple more lines emphasized his broad muscles and added texture to his bloodstained white vest. It was only a rough drawing, but Ella was starting to feel pleased with

it. She had been an X-Men fan since she was little and whenever she was stressed she'd find herself drawing a little sketch of one of the heroic mutants. Somehow, magically, it would make everything better again.

Like now, for instance.

But a deadline was a deadline and if she wanted her lunchtimes back, she knew that all she had to do was to stick it out one more week and then she'd be free.

Finishing Wolverine's shirt, Ella moved her pencil up the page and added extra shading to his crazy hairdo, smoothing out the rough lines she'd drawn yesterday and giving the drawing some depth.

It was much better. With the extra shading, the drawing looked more real, almost as though it were popping out of the page. Ella stared down at it, feeling faintly pleased with herself. At least she was good for something. The lines of the drawing shifted slightly beneath her tired gaze, as though wavering in a desert heat-haze.

Ella squinted down at the picture for a moment, then jumped.

Was it her imagination, or had Wolverine just winked at her?

Ella stared hard at the picture. The cartoon man gazed back at her impassively, muscular arms hanging down at his sides, three razor-sharp adamantium claws jutting from his knuckles.

It was just a drawing. How could it have moved?

Ella rubbed her eyes. She was really losing it. She had to get some more sleep. Perhaps she would skip the party tonight, set her alarm clock extra early, and just try and get some zees. She had read somewhere that the sleep you got before midnight was the best for you and had long suspected that her current routine of going to bed at 3am each night wasn't doing her any favors at all.

But her new house was so creepy, it wasn't her fault that she couldn't sleep.

Ella peered down at Wolverine, pouting. Superheroes don't go to bed early, she thought, a little grumpily. They don't need to. It's just the rest of us who need to conserve our energy.

Yawning widely, Ella sat back in her chair and gazed at the small slit of light pouring forth from beneath the closed blinds. Her mind flitted uneasily back to the events of the previous night. She had been

trying not to think about it, but here, in the silence of the office, the scene replayed itself in her head in full Technicolor.

Matt had gone crazy and pulled a knife on her.

She hadn't dreamed it. It had really happened, but she still couldn't accept it.

Was that some kind of screwy revenge attack against Jen, perhaps? She knew that Matt was kind of a weirdo, but had never suspected he'd turn out to be violent. There was no way she was going to the cops about what had happened—they'd probably just laugh at her for leading him on—but Ella knew that she should really tell someone.

But who?

She sniffed, gazing down at her drawing of Wolverine. He'd protect her, if he was real. That was what superheroes did. They were strong and they protected the weak. It was how people in the real world should behave, but usually didn't.

In comic books, everyone was a hero, everyone could save the day. And nobody attacked you with knives unless there was damn good reason for it.

Ella transferred her gaze to the window, lost in a brief but thoroughly satisfying fantasy of Wolverine hunting down Matt like an animal in the corridors of the school, while the hallway filled with students, all pointing at him and laughing.

That would teach him a thing or two about respect.

As Ella stared off into space, the drawing in front of her shimmered, waves of blue-gray light flickering over it. The cartoon Wolverine shifted on the page, his perspective changing in a blur of roughly scribbled lines, like unfinished animation cells. Color started to flood the image, his suit turning yellow while his claws flashed a gleaming silver. An eyebrow rose quizzically and a tiny point of red fire flared in the depths of his eyes.

Wolverine's wrists silently flexed, as though testing his strength, then his claws started to extend. *Snit! Snit!* Two extra razor-claws slid out of his knuckles, making five in total, as opposed to his usual three.

Slowly, Wolverine brought his arm up, the tips of his four-inch claws making a quiet ripping sound as he slid them through the

paper, out into the real world.

"Not bad. But you need to tweak the hair a little bit."

Ella instinctively pulled her keyboard down to cover the notebook, jolted out of her reverie. She looked up to see Mr Gibbons standing over her, looking down at her. His arms were folded, and he wore a red blazer and a stern look.

"Morning, sir," Ella blustered cheerily. "Report's nearly done."

Mr Gibson tapped the computer screen with a plastic ruler. "Doesn't look done to me."

Ella glanced up guiltily at the computer screen. Her Word document was open and in full view, the words "Friday's Report" typed at the top. The rest of the page was blank.

"Uh, there was a power cut, sir. Damndest thing. Wiped the whole report. I was just about to redo it..."

Mr Gibson pushed his glasses back up onto the bridge of his nose with a finger, trying to suppress a smile. "A tragic accident, I daresay. Just as well for you that your report is going on the front page today, hmm?"

"What?" Ella was thrown.

"That report you did yesterday." Mr Gibson reached into his bag and brought out a thick wedge of papers. "Emails," he said by way of explanation. He tossed them down onto the desk. "Three dozen or so. It seems that you're not the only one who's been having dreamless nights."

Ella flicked through the pile. They were all from students, all praising her article and complaining that they couldn't remember having any dreams in a very long time either. "These all come in today?"

"Uh-huh. I showed them to the editor—he was impressed. Haven't gotten a response to a story like that in a long time. We have a hard enough job getting the kids to care about anything these days. He's going to reprint your story on the front page today."

"Yeah?" A thought struck Ella. "Does that mean I don't have to write my—finish my article?"

Mr Gibson stared hard at Ella. She smiled back at him. The corner of his mouth twitched. "Possibly."

"Cool." Ella started gathering her papers together, flush with relief. There was a creaking sound and she looked up to see that Mr Gibson had settled himself on the desk opposite hers. He intertwined his fingers and gazed at her thoughtfully, then opened his mouth to speak.

Oh God, here it comes, thought Ella. The big lecture.

"Ella," Mr Gibson began. "I couldn't help noticing that recently, you—"

"Hello?" A voice came from behind them. Ella and Mr Gibson turned to see a uniformed cop poised in the doorway of the office. He was holding his cap in his hands and his eyes were fixed on Ella with a grim intensity. "Are you Ella Harris?"

"Depends who's asking," said Ella automatically, then kicked herself. Mr Gibson's eyes flew to her face, then narrowed suspiciously.

"I'm asking." The cop pushed the door open and strode rapidly into the room. He looked exhausted and he had a fading bruise on one side of his face. He dropped his cap down onto a nearby bench, then reached into his pocket and pulled out a blue form covered in illegible black scrawl. "I need you to come to the station with me. It seems that a friend of yours has gone missing."

"A friend?" Ella rose to her feet, a sick feeling washing through her. "Which friend?"

"One Mathew B Irwin. Last seen yesterday leaving the school premises. Failed to arrive home that night. His car was found abandoned in a field outside town. Parents currently going apeshit." The cop scratched his head and looked doubtful. "Our best lead is you."

"Me?"

"Your bag was found in the car. One neon pink number containing schoolbooks, library card and several items of underwear."

Ella reddened, feeling Mr Gibson's gaze on her. She felt a stab of guilt, even though she knew she had nothing to feel guilty about. Cops had that effect on her. "Uh—yeah. That sounds like mine," she said.

The cop held the door open for her and gestured with his head, looking grim. "Shall we?" he said.

Ella sat in the waiting room at the station, waiting patiently for her turn to be interviewed. It was gloomy in the main office, after the bright daylight outside. The place was a hive of activity, with people marching back and forth, phones ringing and the crackle of police radios breaking through the buzz of heated conversation. She felt unreal, as though this wasn't really happening to her. The cop had dragged a couple of extra chairs out from a back room and told Ella to stay put while he found an officer to conduct the interview.

It was a whole lot more boring than she'd expected it to be. The movies made police stations out to be exciting places, full of marching cops and shouting prisoners. This place just looked drab, like a rundown dentist's waiting room. The anti-crime posters on the walls were yellowing and faded, and there was a large hole in the roof through which a tangle of multicolored wires was visible. The place was overflowing with people, none of them very violent looking—just regular people waiting grumpily on dozens of makeshift wooden chairs, looking very, very pissed off.

Ella turned to the man sitting next to her and gave him a sympathetic smile. "So what did they get you for?" she asked, aiming for a little humor.

He just gave her a bleak look then went back to glaring at the receptionist, who was doing her very best to ignore him.

Fine, don't talk to me, thought Ella. Her eyes scanned the row of people sitting opposite her, searching for a friendly face to distract her from her worries. One woman caught her attention right away. She was dressed smartly, if a little haggard looking, with long auburn hair tied back in a hasty pony-tail. She looked about thirty and had an open, cheerful face only slightly marred by the faint rings under her eyes.

She was reading a newspaper. Ella glanced at the title and smiled in recognition.

Perfect. The woman was reading her Springwood High college paper.

She cleared her throat and caught the woman's eye as she looked up. "That's a great paper," she said.

"What? Oh, yeah." The woman glanced at the front. "It was free," she said, by way of explanation. She went back to reading it.

"It's my school paper," said Ella hopefully. "I write articles for it."

"You do? That must be fun."

"Not really. My teacher makes me do it and doesn't even pay me or anything."

The woman stared at her blankly, then put the paper down with a sigh. "What's your name?" she asked.

"Ella."

"That's a pretty name. I'm Sally. Spencer." She leaned over and held out her hand. Ella reached across and shook it. The woman glanced at the receptionist, then gathered up her paper and came over to sit next to Ella. She seemed glad of the distraction. "So, Ella. You got anything in this edition?"

"Yeah. Page five. It's a long article about dreams," said Ella proudly.

"Oh, yeah. I think I just read that." Sally turned to the relevant page and held it up. "You write this?"

"Yup."

"It's good. And funny." Sally paused thoughtfully. "You know a lot of people don't remember their dreams."

"I didn't say I didn't remember them. I said I wasn't having dreams at all."

Sally smiled. "I'm sure you are. You'd go crazy if you didn't."

"Yeah?" Ella was intrigued. "Why?"

"Just because." Sally folded up her paper, and settled back into her chair. "Your mind is very clever and very complicated. It needs to dream to stay healthy, nobody knows why. It works very hard all day, then when you go to sleep, it goes through everything that's happened to you that day, files away important stuff and throws out the rest. Kind of like garbage processing." She tapped Ella's head

with a finger. "It helps us build our long-term memories and forget about trivial stuff."

Ella thought about this. "So is that why I never dream about Brad Pitt covered in chocolate? Is my brain saying he's trivial?"

Sally laughed. "Pretty much. Unless you actually know him in real life. Or you're thinking about him a lot. See, your brain can't tell the difference between what's happened in the real world and what's only happened in your mind. So it really depends on how much you think about it. You have him in your head all day, every day and you just might dream about him."

Ella sat up in her chair. "Cool. How do you know all this stuff?"

"It's my job. Check out the suit." Sally brushed some crumbs from the front of her charcoal-gray shirt and shrugged apologetically. "It looks much better when it hasn't been slept in for two days in a row."

"What are you, like a doctor or a shrink or something?"

It earned her a smile. "Kind of. Although I think the preferred term these days is psychiatrist."

"So." Ella was warming to her subject. "How would I go mad?"

"What, if you didn't dream at all?" Sally shrugged. "At first you'd lose all your concentration. You'd have difficulty taking in new information, or staying focused on anything, and you'd probably be very groggy and irritable."

"But I'm like that every day in school!"

"Lots of things can make you feel like that. Stress, for example. Or a lot of late nights."

"But I'm not stressed." Ella thought about that. "Okay. So I'm a bit stressed, but seriously, I don't think I've dreamed at all in over a month. Maybe even two."

Sally shook her head. "Impossible. You'd be hallucinating by now if that was the case. Your brain would try to dream while you were awake and you'd get very confused. If you didn't dream for a long period of time, you'd slowly develop a whole bunch of mental problems—paranoia and so on. Eventually, you'd most likely go batshit crazy. Excuse the professional jargon," said the lady headshrinker, trying to keep her tone light.

"Weird," said Ella, starting to enjoy the conversation. "So why do I need to dream in the first place?"

"Nobody knows." Sally rubbed her chin thoughtfully, pulling her feet back as a woman in a wheelchair rumbled past. A stern-looking cop directed her to a space in the crowded room, then cuffed her right wheel to a radiator.

"Some people think that it's just the level of sleep that occurs with rapid eye movement—REM—that we need and that dreams are just an accidental by-product, like the brain trying to make sense of random neurons firing as we sleep. Others think that dreams are essential to consciousness itself." Sally scratched her head thoughtfully. "The fact that we hallucinate if we're prevented from dreaming makes me think it's pretty important." She glanced sideways at Ella. "Imagine a giant Brad Pitt appearing in front of you while you were trying to drive. Your brain is willing to risk your life in order to escape from your basic here-and-now consciousness."

"That would be so cool!" Ella grinned at Sally. "So you think I'd be hallucinating by now if I really hadn't dreamed in a month?"

"I'm pretty sure of it."

"I don't remember anything like that..." Something nagged at Ella, but she couldn't quite put her finger on it. "Maybe you're right. Perhaps I'm just forgetting my dreams."

"I'm willing to bet good money on it." Sally Spencer tapped her fingers on the folded paper, then waved to the nearby receptionist. "Scuse me, ma'am. How much longer is it going to be?"

The harassed looking receptionist looked up fleetingly, a phone jammed between her shoulder and ear and a giant sheaf of papers clutched in each hand. She waved irritably at the room in general. "You're after all these people. Ask them." "But I came in before most of them!"

"You wanna do my job? Feel free! After the month I've just had, it's yours."

"This month?"

"Yes honey, this month. The month that Springwood went crazy. They must be putting something in the water, I swear."

"It does seem kind of busy," admitted Sally, glancing round at the packed room.

"There ain't no kind of. The whole town has gone crazy. Loco. Absolutely bug-fucking insane." The receptionist dropped her papers in front of her with a thud. "Look at all this. That's just today's paperwork." She shook her head in wonder, her earrings jangling. "They've all gone crazy, I'm telling you."

Sally thought about it. "How long did you say this has been going on?"

"I told you. 'Bout a month. Feels like a year. I never seen anything like it."

"Okay, I'm sorry. Thanks." Sally turned back to Ella and shrugged. "Maybe the rest of the town has been doing your not-dreaming thing," she said in a low voice.

Ella laughed. "That'd explain all the craziness."

"I'm afraid it might." Sally nodded sagely.

Ella thought about it. "Would that even be possible? I mean, in theory? Perhaps someone has been putting something in the water."

"Well—yes, it's possible. There are certain drugs that can suppress REM sleep. Antidepressant medicines can stop you dreaming, for instance. Especially tricyclic antidepressants and monoamine oxidase inhibitors. They'd do the job."

"These antidepressants—if someone poured a big vat of them into the reservoir, that could stop the entire town from dreaming, right?"

"In theory. Or they could end up just poisoning all the fish."

"Maybe you should talk to the sheriff about this," said Ella. "I mean, it could become a part of the whole criminal investigation thing."

Sally smiled. "Or a column in a student paper."

"You think I should write about it?" Ella's eyes lit up.

"You can do whatever you want. But I'd check with your teacher first. And don't use anyone's real names. Until you can prove anything, that is."

"I'm liking that idea," said Ella. "I'd be like some super-detective. Taking down crazy psychopaths with big hair and bad teeth." She gnawed on her nails excitedly. "But what's the motive? Why would

some criminal mastermind guy want to stop an entire town from dreaming?"

"Look around you." Sally waved a hand at the room. "You're planning some big heist, then what better way to ensure that the cops are all otherwise occupied? It stands to reason, right?"

"But do you really think that—" Ella looked at Sally, and her face fell. "You're humoring me, aren't you?"

"Not at all. I think that if you feel strongly enough about your dream theory, you should look into it. It could be your first big inside story."

"You think the cops will believe me? If I could get an agent and a helicopter and a—"

"Ella Harris?"

"Oh, that's me." Ella looked up as a uniformed officer stopped in front of her.

Sally waved her paper in distress. "Wait up a moment. I was here before her." She looked at Ella apologetically. "No offense."

"None taken."

"I'm sorry, ma'am. The sheriff wants to talk to her. Right away."

"I'll be quick, I promise." Ella jumped to her feet. "Could I get your number? We should talk about this some more when I come to write my article. You'll have to remind me of the name of those tricycle—uh, antidepressant things."

Sally handed her a business card. "Good luck."

Then Ella was gone and Sally settled back to finish reading her paper.

It was coming up to 8pm that night when Dr Sally Spencer finally made her way out of the police station, feeling cramped, weary and in no mood for niceties. Grumbling lightly to herself, she walked across the underground parking lot, brushing the creases out of her suit and sincerely wishing she hadn't worn heels. Her appointment had been a washout, just a formal signing of papers that had lasted barely five minutes before she was dismissed back to the waiting room with no

further explanation. Then she had been forced to endure a further wait of nearly an hour before the sheriff was free to interview her about the events of the previous day.

He had been sympathetic, but obviously had other things on his mind. Sally's grand plan of confiding in him about the confusing events surrounding Mitchell's death was swept aside in the sheriff's rush to get her to sign innumerable forms in triplicate, so that the death certificate could be issued. She didn't know why he hadn't just faxed her the forms, rather than asking her to come over in person. It would have been a lot quicker and saved them both a lot of waiting around.

Shaking her head in resignation, Sally stopped at her rented car, a sleek gray Mercedes and fumbled in her pocket for her keys.

Then she pitched face down across the hood of the car as something heavy connected solidly with the back of her head.

There was a slamming of doors behind her, echoing hollowly around the confines of the concrete parking lot. Three men dressed in blue suits climbed elegantly down from a big black van and made their way toward her. The fourth man gazed down at the unconscious form of Sally, then carefully stowed his bat away in a duffel bag and zipped up the top. He pressed a button on his radio headset.

"Suspect acquired," he said.

EIGHT

Jacob screamed and woke up. For one moment he fought against an overwhelming sense of dread, which clung to him like a crushing weight. Then, with a gasp and a shudder, he threw it off and lunged upward into a sitting position, staring around wildly at the darkness. The world was bathed in a cold dark blue light, a pale mist saturating the air and drifting across the tops of the dark buildings, while above him the trees waved lazily in the wind.

Trees?

Jacob sat up, blinking rapidly and glanced around with small, panicky movements. Sleepiness and disorientation clung to him like a wet blanket as he rubbed his eyes with balled fists and looked again, unwilling to believe what he was seeing.

He was outside, sitting in a dark alleyway, half propped up against a brick wall. A tangle of power lines arced overhead, humming quietly. To his left was a plastic dumpster. The top was off and flies buzzed ceaselessly around it. The stench hit him a moment later, as his senses slowly returned and he wrinkled his nose in distaste.

There was no question about it.

He was definitely outside of Westin Hills.

Jacob tipped his head back and looked up at the sky, for what felt like the first time in a century. It was such a dark blue that it was almost black, but a faint yellow light suffused the horizon in all directions, bringing with it the far-off promise of dawn. Jacob hadn't seen the sky in over five years. There was no R&R for Westin Hills inmates, or if there was, it certainly wouldn't apply to the kids in his ward.

He closed his eyes and breathed in deeply, trying to ignore the stench of the dumpster and was rewarded with a very faintly earthy scent. It had rained recently, and the smell of it still lingered in the air beneath the smell of garbage and diesel fumes. As he watched, a pigeon took off from a nearby power line and flapped lazily upwards, catching the breeze beneath its tatty gray wings and soaring up until it vanished into the darkness.

Jacob let out his breath in a long sigh. He was free. But how?

He searched his memory for details of the previous night, but drew a complete and utter blank. A buzz of irrational fear passed through him, and he pulled his legs tightly up to his body and wrapped his arms around them, glancing around anxiously. He had dreamed about this moment for so long, but now that it was here, he felt weird. Naked. Almost as if he had been abandoned.

Okay. He had to focus. What was the last thing he remembered?

The cell... The guards...

The gun.

Oh God, the gun.

Jacob closed his eyes and pressed the balls of his palm into his eyelids, making purple rings dance in front of his eyes.

What had he done this time?

A shiver ran through him, as Jacob realized with a start that he was freezing cold. He rubbed his forearms to warm himself up. He was still wearing his blood-soaked hospital gown and nothing else. His feet were so cold that they were almost numb and as the seconds passed he became aware of a painful stinging sensation flooding up his arm, as his sleep-deadened limbs came back to life.

He looked down. An angry red gash ran the length of his arm, the edges of the wound swollen and crusted with dried blood.

Completely bewildered, Jacob lowered his arm and flexed his fingers. The wound stung, but it was superficial. It wouldn't hamper him.

That was good.

His eyes scanned the darkened alley around him for some clue as to his whereabouts. The alleyway ran another hundred years or so forward, then opened out onto a busy street. Cars swished past, the red glow of their taillights visible in the gathering darkness.

No clue there. Jacob carefully climbed to his feet and stood swaying for a moment, then pulled his hospital gown more tightly around him and started stepping carefully down the alleyway toward the road.

After a few minutes of walking, Jacob became aware of a faint thudding sound coming from overhead. Jacob glanced up. A police

helicopter was flying toward him, sweeping back and forth across the top of the houses.

Its search light was on.

Jacob's heart immediately sped up. He looked around him, searching for a place to hide. His gaze fell on the dumpster and something in him rebelled.

All those flies. No way!

Then the chopper buzzed down from above him, and the end of the alleyway flooded with light.

The next thing Jacob knew, he was inside the dumpster. The stench of fetid garbage and rotting meat assaulted his nostrils. He coughed, then clamped his hand over his nose and mouth to stop himself from gagging. He felt the tickling sensation of flies crawling up his back and swatted wildly behind him, then froze as the white searchlight settled upon the dumpster. He watched the black shapes of flies buzz around in an excited circle above him, backlit by the beam of white light and held his breath.

After what seemed like a lifetime, the light moved on, swirling off up the alleyway. Jacob counted to twenty, gritting his teeth as putrid garbage soaked through his already sodden gown, then threw it all off himself and climbed out of the dumpster as quickly as he could. Shaking himself off, Jacob pulled a banana peel off his shoulder and tossed it to the ground, taking a deep breath.

Dusting off his hands, he turned around.

There was a police car at the end of the alleyway.

Fear shot an adrenaline bolt through Jacob's nervous system. He dropped into a crouch and scuttled over to the dumpster as fast as he could, then peered out from behind it, quivering with tension.

Two uniformed cops were getting out of the back of the car, wielding flashlights.

Shit.

Jacob pressed himself back against the wall, listening as hard as he could. He had no idea how he'd got out of Westin Hills, but obviously they'd sent cops to bring him back. He was dangerous, after all. He was wanted for murder and they thought he was still armed. If they

caught him, they would very probably kill him before they got close enough to see that he no longer had the gun.

Until then, he was on his own. Nobody would come to his aid. Unless...

Of course! Jacob's eyes brightened, even as he heard the door of the car slam and the disembodied crackle of police radios.

Kane would help him. He was the one who'd put the gun under his pillow. He had to know what was going on.

It was his only hope.

Jacob tensed and squeezed his eyes shut, praying to whatever deity was still awake. A voice in the back of his mind screamed at him to stay still, to stay hidden and hope that the cops would pass him by. But at the same time he knew instinctively that if he did this, he would be caught.

He only had one chance to get away and that was to start running as soon as possible.

But first, he needed a distraction.

Jacob's eyes flicked rapidly down the alleyway, then he began to move, slowly, edging around the dumpster. With his bare foot, he pressed down as hard as he dared on the brake lever that locked the dumpster's wheel, moving around and doing the same thing to the other one.

Then he braced his feet against the dumpster and pushed it away from him as hard as he could.

The dumpster rumbled forward and hit the opposite wall with a crash that was shockingly loud in the early morning silence. Then it rocked backward and upended itself, blocking the alley with a tumbling sea of trash.

It wasn't much of an obstruction, but for now, it would have to do.

Then Jacob was off, haring up the alleyway as fast as his cold legs would carry him.

Almost immediately he heard shouting voices and knew that the cops had seen him. Rusty drinks cans and sharp stones crunched underfoot, cutting Jacob's feet, but he paid them no heed. Reaching the end of the alleyway, he turned the corner onto a residential street

and sprinted madly down the sidewalk, away from the cops and Westin Hills, and toward freedom.

Ella popped an effervescent vitamin pill into her mouth and chewed it thoughtfully. She lay in bed, an absorbed look on her face.

"You know you shouldn't really chew those, sweetie."

"But it's all fizzy. Look." Ella opened her mouth to reveal a mass of foam. "Pretty cool, huh?" she gurgled.

Mrs Harris pulled a face. "You're supposed to dissolve them in water, not just eat them like that. I'm sure they're bad for you."

"You thought that eating the little labels on apples was bad for me, Mom."

"But they're made of plastic—"

"Don't worry, Mom. I'm sure it won't kill me." Ella winked at her mother, swallowed the pill, then yawned and pulled the covers up around her neck. It was late and she was tired, wanting nothing more than to slip into the warm oblivion of sleep. And to forget the last couple of days. She had decided not to tell her mother about her lunchtime trip to the cop shop, just as she had neglected to tell her about the incident with Matt yesterday. It had been hard enough telling the sheriff about it all and the last thing she needed was a lecture about getting into cars with strange boys.

She had done her duty by talking to the police. Let them deal with him.

Ella gazed up at her mother. "Read me a bedtime story?"

"Very funny." Her mom stood up and pecked her on the forehead. She gazed down at Ella fondly. "How'd the report go today?"

"It didn't." Ella wiped at her mouth, then sat up in bed, plumping the pillows up behind her. "I spent the whole of lunch break staring at the wall, then wrote the report in lessons instead of paying attention. Hey! That's what I wanted to ask you. Have you had any dreams this month?"

"Dreams?" Her mom tipped her head to one side as she tried to keep up with Ella's rapid-fire thought processes. "Not that I can

remember, sweetie."

"Me neither. That's what I wrote my report about."

"That's—interesting." Mrs Harris regarded her offspring with a patience born of sixteen years of hard parenting and shook her head despairingly. She had hoped that working for the school paper would teach Ella a little responsibility, maybe develop some other interests besides hanging out with those rich-bitch friends of hers and pretending not to smoke.

So far, she was on a roll.

"Nah," said Ella thoughtfully. "It's not really. Now ask me how those no-good friends of mine are, whether I have a boyfriend yet and if I'm practicing safe sex."

"Hey, I'm your mother! It's my job to stick my nose into your business."

Ella smiled. "Goodnight, Mom."

"Night, sweetie."

Mrs Harris got up and padded to the door, shaking her head wryly as she clicked off the light. Then a frown furrowed her brow, and she paused in the doorway as she registered Ella's words. "Honey?"

"Haven't seen them in days; all boys are stupid; and mind your own business," said Ella dutifully.

"Just checking." Her mother stepped out into the hallway, pulling the door closed behind her. The floorboards creaked as she made her way across the landing and down the stairs.

Peace descended over the house.

Ella snuggled down under the covers, pulling the blanket up around her ears. Then she counted to twenty, gazing around her as she did so.

She waited a moment, listening carefully.

Then she said, "You guys okay?"

"I'm good, *sweetie*." Henry rolled out from under the bed in a cloud of dust, followed by Jen, who stepped out of Ella's jumbo-sized wardrobe trailing a selection of scarves and hangers that clung to her like colorful birds. She had a minor coughing fit and looked around disapprovingly, straightening her minuscule miniskirt before whipping out her mirror to check her makeup.

"Hey, she's my mom. She's gets to call me whatever she wants." Ella threw back the covers and hopped out of bed.

"Nice PJs."

"You're funny. Throw me those jeans, will you?"

Jen looked up from her compact mirror. "You're wearing jeans? I thought you were going with a dress. And I don't see why we have to hide."

"You heard the old girl. She doesn't want me hanging with you guys. She thinks you're a bad influence."

"And that's stopped you—when, exactly?"

Ella opened her wardrobe and rummaged around inside to find something suitable to wear. A lot of her clothing was shabby and old, but she had one or two newer items she'd been planning to wear for a while. She picked out her favorite—a sparkly, low-cut black top, which she'd chosen to go with her new Lucky brand jeans—and snapped the price tags off. Reaching down, she started to undo the cord on her pajama pants, then stopped. "Henry! Turn your back, that's a good boy."

Henry rummaged in his pocket. "I'll pay you ten bucks for twenty seconds."

"One word. No."

"Your loss." Henry turned around with a shrug.

"Careful, Ell," said Jen. "If he ever got to see a woman naked, he'd probably spontaneously combust."

Ella giggled. "That's a cleaning job I could live without."

"You're all wrong." Henry folded his arms defiantly. "I saw a naked woman once."

"Your mother doesn't count."

"Fine. Insult me if it makes you feel better about yourself. I prefer to make myself useful." Henry glanced over his shoulder at the window, chewing his nails hyperactively. "And speaking of insults, where's Matt got to? He's supposed to be here by now."

"Who cares?" Ella felt her face flush and quickly looked away. She hadn't told them about her fight with Matt and didn't intend to. She wanted nothing more than to forget the whole thing. She sniffed irritably. "Didn't know he was invited anyway."

"He wasn't," said Henry. "But he called me and asked. What am I supposed to do, say no?" He crossed to the window and gazed out. "Anyhow, it sounds like we should be more concerned about this Krueger character he keeps talking about."

Jen chuckled. "He called you too, huh?"

"Yup. Poor kid's delusional. Happens to the best of us."

Ella turned around in the middle of changing, clutching her scrunched PJ top to her chest to cover her bare breasts. "What did you say?"

"Freddy Krueger," said Henry. "And omigod—you're naked!"

"Semi-naked. And quit staring."

Henry opened his mouth to retort, then paused as somebody tapped on the window. He gave Ella a lingering look, then wandered over and peered out. "It's Nikki." He drew back the curtain. "Yes?" he said suspiciously.

There was a muffled reply from outside.

"What was that? You want me to open the window?"

Another muffled reply was followed by a loud bang that rattled the glass.

"No thank you. We don't want any pamphlets, thanks all the same."

"For Christ's sake." Ella walked over to the window and lifted the sash, helping Nikki as she scrambled into the room. She was dressed up in black punk-rock garb, garish red streaks lighting up her shoulder-length black hair.

Ella gasped at the sight of her. A couple of fresh bruises marred her left cheekbone and the large bandage on her wrist was leaking dark blood. The rest of her arm looked bruised and swollen, and there was a second bandage on her elbow that reached nearly all the way up her upper arm to her shoulder.

Jen looked her up and down. "Nice," she said, not quite keeping the irony from her voice.

"Thanks," replied Nikki dryly. She gazed at Jen levelly for a couple of seconds. "Aren't you going to ask me what happened?"

"You're assuming that I care." Jen cocked a warning eyebrow at Henry before turning back to Ella, who was still topless. "So, are you

going dressed like that? You're gonna be real popular."

"You can always turn around."

"But I so wanted to watch."

Ella quickly clipped on a black strapless bra, then slipped the sparkly top over her head. She shot Nikki a sympathetic look, resolving to talk to her about her new injuries later. "So," she said, trying to restart the conversation as casually as she could, "you're telling me Matt called you all about this Freddy guy? What did he say, exactly?"

"Oh, just stuff," said Henry. "He sounded odd. Very odd. He kept saying this guy's name, over and over again." He jumped onto the bed and did a very passable imitation of Matt's voice. "Freddy Krueger. Freddy Krueger. Freddy—"

"Get down off there. And what about Freddy Krueger?"

"Something about, uh, he had found out something and it was important because... um..." Henry scratched his head. "Funny, now you come to mention it, I can't remember exactly what he said. Damn that ADD." He looked up at the others. "Guys! Help me out here."

"Haven't a clue. All I can remember was how important he thought it was. And that guy's name."

Henry turned to Ella. "You know who he is?"

"Me? Why would I know? He didn't call *me*." Ella finished dressing and started pulling open the drawers on her dressing table, hunting for makeup to cover how flustered she was. "And if it was so important, why all the phonage? Why not come over and tell you in person?"

"This is Matt we're talking about here."

"Right. I just thought that—"

Just then, a horn honked outside.

"Come on. Cab's here. I don't wanna keep Dimitri waiting."

Jen said it so casually, but Ella felt a shiver go up her back at the mention of his name. "Cool," she said breezily, slipping into her top and grabbing her purse from the dresser. "Let's go party."

A short cab ride later, Ella heaved open the industrial metal door of the school MediLab and peered inside. A wash of dank, cold air hit her nostrils. She peered blindly into the darkness, wondering if they'd come to the right place. She could feel the distant thump of music rumbling along the steel floor, but couldn't see any light inside.

She heaved the spring-loaded door further open and jammed her foot against it to hold it ajar, then motioned with her head for the others to join her. "Remind me again. What is this place?"

"MediLab," Jen said briskly, peering around at the blackness. She popped a stick of bubble gum into her mouth. "Burned down last month—didn't you hear? Couple of students got a bit too frisky around a can of ether. Blew the place sky high." She popped her gum, her face just visible under the starlight. "Can't believe you've never been here before."

"Never." Ella gazed fixedly into the gloom, trying to make out the inside of the building through the darkness. She sniffed, then wrinkled her nose. There was a definite smell of burnt rubber in the air and something worse underneath it, an acid stench that clung to the inside of her nostrils and coated her throat.

She coughed, pulling a face. Nice.

Henry sauntered past her, cheekily trailing one hand across the back of her hips as he did so. "I've been here before. It's a great make-out spot."

Ella snorted. "In your dreams. And quit feelin' me up. Just 'cos I can't see you don't mean I can't feel you." She waved at the nighttime landscape behind her, where the white gleam of the new sports hall was just visible. "You wanna cop a grope? Try hitting on one of those cheerleaders. They'll sleep with anyone."

The words were out of her mouth before she could stop herself.

Ella froze, then half turned and glanced at Jen. She didn't seem to have heard her. Relieved, Ella waited a couple more seconds before clearing throat loudly. "So. Is this place safe?"

Jen pulled the gum out of her mouth and stuck it on the wall, gazing into the blackness. "Who cares? It's soundproof, is the main

thing. Don't want the cops showing up and kicking us out, do we? This is school property, after all."

"I guess." Ella waited a moment. "Wanna go in?"

"Please. After you," said Jen. She gestured to the open door.

Ella glanced back at Jen, but her face was set, showing no emotion. "What am I, your minefield monkey? Come on. You said it was safe."

"I did. I just want you to go first."

"Fine." Ella screwed up her nerves and forced herself to step forward into the darkness, one foot at a time, holding out one hand ahead of her like a blind man. There could be anything in there—a break in the floor, a live electric cable hanging down, a killer waiting round the corner, knife poised...

As Ella's eyes adjusted, she could just make out a huge door at the far end of the corridor. A faint glow of yellow light spilled out from underneath it. Feeling slightly more reassured, she stepped toward it, then paused, frowning. "You hear that?"

"What?"

"That." Ella's eyes flicked nervously around the dark corridor.

This time they all heard it—a very faint but definite high-pitched scraping noise, like metal being dragged across metal.

Screeeeeeeeeeee...

Nikki shivered. "This place is seriously creepy. You sure you want us to go in there?"

Jen snorted, tossing her head. "What are you, like, twelve years old? C'mon, Nik, it's just a spooky old building. You're into all that goth crap, you should be right at home here." She elbowed her way past Nikki and started off confidently along the corridor, her high heels clunking on the metal walkway.

Ella exchanged a worried look with Nikki, then started off after her. Then she screamed shrilly as a dark shape jumped out at Jen, grabbed her by the shoulders and dragged her to the ground.

Ella screamed and turned to run.

"Ella!"

Ella froze at the sound of the familiar voice, then turned and peered fearfully over her shoulder. Her shoulders sagged with relief, then she flushed with embarrassment. "Dimitri!"

"Hey, ladies. How's it hanging?" Dimitri pulled Jen back to her feet and hugged her against his chest, grinning like a maniac. "Been watching those old eighties horror flicks before bedtime, have we?"

"That wasn't funny!" Jen cuffed at Dimitri, who held up his hands to protect his face. He laughed and grabbed Jen's wrists, pushing her back against the wall of the corridor and kissing her all over. She made a grumbling sound of protest and tried to push him away.

Ella made eye contact with Nikki and pulled face. Nikki giggled, then mimed sticking a finger down her throat. "You guys have to do that in public?"

Dimitri came up for air. "That's the fun of it." He winked at Ella, "Hey, I don't know what you're complaining about. You're next, cutie."

Ella's blush was visible even in the semi darkness. Her mouth opened and closed a couple of times while she tried to think of an appropriate reply. "How 'bout you two get a motel room, huh? 'Cos you're scaring the normal people."

Dimitri shrugged, then laughed as Jen broke free from him, grouchily pulling her top back down. "Cut it out!" she said sharply. "You always do that."

Ella raised an eyebrow at Jen. Couldn't she see that Dimitri was just kidding around? She watched as he made a fresh onslaught on Jen, totally unfazed, sweeping her off her feet and trying to kiss her face while she slapped at him half-heartedly, protesting.

Hell, if Dimitri were *her* boyfriend, she'd never snap at him, even if she were in a cranky mood. Jen just didn't know what she had.

Ella felt Henry's questioning gaze on her, and shook herself. She reached out and casually tapped Dimitri's arm, feigning nonchalance. "You, uh, you get the wine?"

"That and more." Dimitri licked his lips, then flourished a hand behind him. A large keg of beer was visible in the half-light, propped against the wall. "You lovely ladies wanna give me a hand getting it down the steps?"

Jen rounded on Dimitri. "I thought I told you not to try and move that by yourself. If you hurt that knee of yours before tryouts on Thursday—"

"I won't. That's why I'm getting you guys to help me. You're just women, so it doesn't matter if you get hurt." Dimitri grinned.

"You're a real hoot," muttered Jen under her breath.

Ella watched Dimitri out of the corner of her eye, backlit by the torchlight, and felt her heart swell. She almost forgot just how gorgeous he was. When she was away from him, it was easy to convince herself he wasn't as cute as she remembered, but every time she saw him she was smitten afresh. There wasn't a single thing not to like about the guy, from his strong, high-cheekboned face to the powerful symmetry of his athletic figure. He wasn't a particularly big guy, but he gave the impression that he was, his broad shoulders perfectly balancing out his narrow waist, his well-defined six-pack just tantalizingly visible under the tight black T-shirt he always wore, like a kind of uniform.

Tonight he was wearing sandy green combat pants with scuffed sneakers, which Ella found adorable. Everything else about him was so immaculate that she wondered if he scuffed his shoes deliberately, just to look cool. The outfit was rounded off by a thick silver biker chain wrapped around his waist in place of a belt and a single leather wristband with the name of some indeterminate rock band scratched into it.

Dimitri was looking especially hot, but Ella doubted the logic of her coming here tonight. It wasn't like they'd get to talk much, and she would rather stick needles in her own eyes than watch Dimitri and Jen glide around the dancefloor together, Mr and Mrs Perfection, while she sat on a stool by herself and drowned her sorrows.

But she was here now, so she had to see it through.

Stupid, stupid...

As she watched, Dimitri turned around and grinned at her, gesturing at the beer keg. "These things always seem like such a good idea at the time."

Ella grinned back foolishly, noticing how the flashlight lit up his eyes from the inside, turning them a rich coffee color. He was so cute.

She realized he was waiting for some kind of a reply. "Yeah. Sorry. They do."

Dimitri nodded thoughtfully and grinned again, then turned away from her, busying himself with the barrel. Ella kicked herself. What was wrong with her? She could be cute and funny with every other guy in school, but this guy said one word to her and her brain turned instantly to the consistency of Chinese noodles. He must have thought she was such a retard.

It was the last straw. She would be dateless all the way through high school, and die old and alone with only her thirty strange-smelling cats to mourn her passing.

Sighing, she helped the others open the main door.

Inside the MediLab, the party was in full swing. The fire-damaged room was practically a shell, the twisted, blackened walls shored up by builder's jacks and caked in the dried remains of white firefighting foam. The place had a ghostly, unearthly feel, lit only by the flickering luminescence that poured forth from several hundred tea-light candles scattered across every available surface. Drifting dust glittered in the shafts of light and the room was hazy with drifting cigarette smoke.

Henry stepped up beside her and peered into the room. "What's with the Sting video?"

Ella shrugged, gazing out at the dancefloor. Over a hundred revelers packed the floor, their writhing bodies picked out in flickering monochrome as they danced to the techno music blasting out of the two massive portable speakers set up at the front of the room. Shot glasses and plastic beer cups littered the charred benches that lined the walls of the room and the air pulsed with the energy that poured from everyone in the place, heavy with swirling smoke and teenage pheromones.

The dancers were all young students in their mid-to-late teens and they were having one hell of a good time. They were dressed in an overlapping mix of styles and colors, representing every fashion from

the Sixties, Seventies, Eighties and Nineties. Lithe young cheerleaders gyrated to the pounding beat, the feather boas and hippy beads strung around their necks in direct contrast to their ultra-modern miniskirts and goth-inspired studded wristbands. The boys wore fashion sportswear and too much cologne, the older guys wearing biker boots and grungy baseball caps while the younger ones stuck to the tried-and-tested untucked shirt.

Ella put her hands on her hips and looked around the room in bewilderment. "Who are these people?"

"I told you," said Jen. "Everyone."

"Oh." Ella licked her parched lips, then reached for a cup. All that exertion had made her thirsty. "Mind if I get a drink before we start the revelry?"

"Go for it." Jen took Dimitri's hand and led him off through the throng. Ella busied herself with filling her cup from the keg, surreptitiously watching the pair as they found a spot in the middle of the room and began dancing together. Their bodies moved to a slow and sensuous beat that made only passing reference to the wild thud of the music. Ella felt a small knot of resentment begin to grow within her chest as she watched them hanging off each other, oblivious to anyone else's presence. From the look on Dimitri's face, he had never known anyone more desirable in the whole world.

If only he knew.

A picture of Matt slammed into Ella's head and she shook herself, trying to stay focused. Now was not the time. It was inevitable that Dimitri would find out about Matt and Jen sooner or later, but it wouldn't be from her.

At least, not as long as she wanted to stay friends with Jen.

Ella felt someone step up beside her. Her eyes slid sideways and she groaned inwardly. The last thing she needed was some idiot hitting on her when she was trying to be miserable. She put down her drink with a petulant clatter and eyeballed the guy, who she vaguely recognized from her phys ed class—his name was Ralph, or it could have been Peter. Whatever. Ella sighed. Ralph/Peter was five foot nothing of dogged persistence in a grubby Skid Row T-shirt, usually found hanging around the computer rooms in school. He had lank

black hair and breath that could strip the paint off a door at ten paces. She knew he had a thing for her because, every time she passed him in the corridor, he would turn the color of a fire extinguisher and stammer uncontrollably before running for the nearest exit.

After ignoring him for as long as it was polite to do so, Ella sighed and looked down. Ralph's glassy smile broadened.

"What?" she asked blankly, her attention still firmly fixed on the smooching couple in the middle of the dancefloor.

"You wanna go, uh, you know..." he started.

"You know, *what?*"

"Uh..." Ralph licked his lips and looked from Ella to the dancefloor then back again.

Ella pretended not to understand. "What?" she asked him again, giving him her best "fuck off" stare.

It worked. Ralph's mouth worked silently for a second, a hint of desperation showing in his eyes, then he gave up. "Nothing. Never mind. Excuse me, I have to, uh..."

He grabbed his drink and fled.

"Harsh." Henry stepped smoothly into Ralph's place at Ella's side and casually looped an arm around her waist. He was very warm and smelled faintly of red wine. When she didn't move away he took a sip of his drink, his eyes scanning the dancefloor.

"Yeah, well." Ella was in no mood to defend herself. She pushed her hair out of her eyes and pouted. "He started it."

"Tread lightly, because you tread on my dreams."" Henry gazed out at the crowd, a strange look on his face.

"What?"

"S'a poem." Henry leaned in closer to Ella, so she could hear him above the hot thump of the music. His lips brushed the side of her face as he spoke. "Had I the heavens' embroidered cloths... I would spread the cloths under your feet." He lifted the arm around her waist until it encircled her shoulders and gave her a squeeze. "But I, being poor, have only my dreams... I have spread my dreams under your feet. Tread lightly, because you tread on my dreams..." He took

another sip of his drink. "Yeats, I think." He covered his mouth with a hand, then gave a hearty burp. "Of course, I paraphrase."

"Henry!" Ella was genuinely impressed. "I never knew you could read."

"My dad taught it to me. Shortly before he shot himself. So much for the pen being mightier than the sword." Henry downed his drink in one, then carelessly dropped his arm from round Ella's shoulders and gazed with interest at the beer table across the room. "Ooh, are those cookies?"

Ella turned, but Henry was already off, slipping through the heaving crowd. She watched him in bemusement, then glanced back over to the spot where Jen and Dimitri had been. They had gone.

Shit.

Ella quickly scanned the crowd, but the pair had completely vanished. She looked around for backup from Nikki, but her friend was deep in conversation with a macho jock in a leather jacket, gazing at him coyly and batting her eyelashes. He was examining the bandage on her wrist, looking concerned.

"Go, Nikki," thought Ella gloomily. "But what about me?"

Sighing, she put her drink down and flounced over to the side of the room. A bunch of filing cabinets had been overturned and stacked one on top of the other to create a makeshift bar and a somber-looking DJ sat at one end, his dyed white dreadlocks bound up with the same black vinyl tape that crisscrossed his muscular body. He had daubed his ebony-black skin with a dusting of flour, like war paint and bright white tattoos wound their way up his bulging biceps.

She took a seat by him and sat back, folding her arms. "Hey, Scoot. You seen Dimitri?"

"He left with his lady friend. 'Bout thirty seconds ago."

"Right. Thanks."

Ella sighed. She'd just known that the pair of them were going to split. And here she was, all dolled up and Dimitri was gone. She felt as though all the light had just gone out in the room, leaving her with nothing but emptiness. She wished heartily that she had never come out this evening.

As though on cue, a distant rumble of thunder sounded, audible even above the music. Ella held onto her drink as the broken glass in the boarded-up windows rattled, eliciting a chorus of whoops and cheers from the hyped-up partygoers. A tattooed young girl wearing purple furry boots and a yellow builder's helmet jumped up onto the makeshift bar and began dancing in the candlelight, spraying them with the bottle of beer she carried. The party was a definite success and everyone was having a great time.

But somehow, Ella just didn't feel like partying.

Sighing, she sat back on her bar stool. She took a sip from her warm drink and pulled a face, gazing off into the far distance as she imagined how this night would have gone if Dimitri had been hers.

If only...

"Hey, cutie."

Ella looked up into the light to see Dimitri standing over her. His shirt was unbuttoned to the waist and his shoulder-length hair spilled loosely over his shoulders, lit by the flashing strobe lights. A glass of white wine dangled carelessly from one hand. Ella swallowed her drink, trying not to choke on it and quickly wiped her mouth with the back of her hand, trying to hide her surprise. "Hey. I thought you guys left. What happened to Jen?"

"She had to split. She was in a bad mood." Dimitri shook his head, looking troubled. "You know how she gets sometimes."

"Yeah, I do. I thought she was a little cranky tonight. Must be the end of the sale season at Prada." Ella smiled up at Dimitri, her heart pounding in her chest. Was she actually having a conversation with this guy?

"So anyway—here I am, all dressed up with nowhere to go." Dimitri studied her, his head tipped to one side, an indefinable expression in his dark eyes. "Wanna dance for a bit?"

"I—yeah, sure. Maybe."

"Maybe as in yes?"

"Guess I've got nothing better to do." Ella quickly slid off her stool, unable to believe her luck. Jen could return at any minute, but she wasn't about to waste this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. Dimitri

gave a mock bow, then took her hand in his and led her onto the dance floor.

As though on cue, the rapid-fire techno music died away and a slow jam came on. The crowd miraculously melted away, making a space for them on the floor. Candlelight sparkled as Ella slipped her hands over Dimitri's shoulders and stepped in close to him, burying her face in the warm depths of his hair. She breathed in deeply. He smelled like cigarette smoke and whisky, and after a moment she felt him slide his hands around her waist, running them up the smooth fabric of her dress, over the curve of her back.

Ella lifted up her head and sighed happily, feeling her stress melt away. This was how things should be. Suddenly, she didn't care who saw them together or what happened if Jen found out. All that mattered was this moment, Dimitri's hands on her waist, his deliciously firm body pressed against hers.

Ella closed her eyes, losing herself in the sensations.

Dimitri stroked Ella's hair, then rested his hand on her shoulder, the wine glass still hanging from his fingers.

But then, behind Ella's back, the wine in Dimitri's glass started to bubble, then boil. With seconds it had turned to steam and evaporated completely. Cracks crept up the stem of the wine glass as it started to melt, slumping down into a twisted sculpture of molten glass. It flopped over onto Dimitri's hand and rolled up his arm in a shimmering wave, coating it completely, solidifying into six-inch long glass daggers at the end of his fingertips. Candlelight glinted off the razor-sharp points.

Dimitri pulled back from Ella, then pressed his lips tenderly on her forehead before moving in closer, running his deadly glass-taloned fingers up toward her throat.

NINE

Jacob skidded around the corner and ran flat out down the road. Behind him, he heard the sounds of pursuit—slamming doors, cobbled boots pounding on the sidewalk, the shouts of the cops as they chased him. They were fast, but Jacob had a good thirty seconds lead on them, and quickly lost sight of them as he dodged and ducked around a series of big rig tankers parked outside a late night gas station.

He ran diagonally across the road and leapt up onto the sidewalk on the other side. His five years of incarceration hadn't been wasted—he had honed his body via the asylum's gym facility on a daily basis, working himself to exhaustion. Now all his hard work was paying off and he was glad of every last ounce of muscle power as he increased his speed, angry shouts ringing in his ears.

The night air was freezing, but Jacob paid it no heed as he jumped a low-slung rusty chain barrier and hurtled across a parking lot toward an industrial complex. The lights in the buildings were out, but Jacob ran toward them, hoping to find a door open so he could duck inside and hide.

He slammed into door after door. They were all locked.

Time for a change of plan.

The thump of rock music drew his attention and he hared around the side of the building to see the welcome glow of a late night bar. Its neon sign cast soft pink and blue shadows across the asphalt outside as he raced toward it, looking frantically for somewhere to hide. He dived down behind a parked car and peered over the top, while the sounds of pursuit behind him grew louder. The parking lot was full, a lone motorcyclist sitting proudly astride his black Kawasaki street bike in front of the bar, showing off to a gaggle of scantily clad girls who loitered nearby.

Late night revelers spilled out of the open front door, lounging against the metal crash barriers and smoking. For a moment Jacob stared at them in intense longing, unable to comprehend such a carefree existence.

Then the thump of helicopter rotors sounded in the distance and he jumped to his feet and strode quickly toward the door of the bar, trying to make it look like he was on his way to meet a friend. Too late, he remembered what he was wearing. Judging by the horrified looks on the faces of the revelers, he guessed that not too many people went to Billy's Blues Bar dressed in a bloodstained asylum gown.

But it was too late to turn back. Ignoring the crowd that stared at him and whispered, he marched confidently up to the front door. Something nagged at his peripheral vision and Jacob slowed his pace slightly, glancing tensely around him.

There was a cop car in the parking lot.

Shit!

Even as Jacob was figuring out his next move, the cop stepped out of the bar, wiping his chin on a napkin and glaring around him. His eyes locked with Jacob's and he froze, as though unable to believe what he was seeing.

Jacob moved first. With surprising speed he lunged to one side and headed straight toward the young biker, who still sat astride his motorcycle, revving the engine. A moment later Jacob's fist connected solidly with the side of the biker's head, and he went down like a ton of bricks.

Without breaking his stride Jacob threw his leg over the seat of the motorbike, crunched his bare foot down on the kickstand and screeched away from the bar with a spray of gravel.

He hadn't ridden a motorcycle since he was young, but Jacob felt it all come flooding back as he sped across the parking lot toward the road. He reached across and flicked on the headlamps, then shifted his weight in the warm leather of the seat, gripping the tank tightly with his knees and angling his body into the rushing wind. A feeling of elation slowly spread through him as he shot out onto the road, banked the bike around and headed off into the night, almost giddy with the sensation of freedom.

But he wasn't out of the woods yet. Not by a long shot. Almost immediately, a siren sounded behind him as the cop from Billy's Bar screeched out of the parking lot in hot pursuit. A few seconds later it

was joined by a second siren, as the cop car from the alleyway caught up with him. Jacob sped up, gripping the handlebars tightly as the Kawasaki flew up the deserted road, bouncing over potholes and weaving back and forth. He was exhausted, and his arms shook as he as he fought to keep the big muscle bike under control.

A sudden burst of white light blinded him. The bike wobbled wildly as Jacob blinked rapidly, dazzled. The *chka-chka-chka* of rotors came from overhead, frighteningly loud, and Jacob realized the police helicopter had found him.

Sons of bitches!

Gritting his teeth, Jacob gunned the engine, accelerating as much as he dared, trying to stay ahead of the blinding beam. He threw a wild glance into his rearview mirror to see the three cop cars on his tail. Their whirling red and blue lights washed over him, and the piercing sound of their sirens filled his head.

Shit, shit, shit.

He had to get off the road, and soon, or he stood no chance.

Bracing himself, Jacob slammed on the brake. The rear wheel started to skid almost immediately, but he held on tightly, focusing every ounce of his being on stopping the bike from sliding out from under him. It dropped back between the two speeding cop cars, so close that he could see the enraged expressions on the driver's faces. As soon as he was behind the two cars he hauled the bike around to one side, veering off into a side lane. The engine screamed in protest, but Jacob held on tightly, his eyes scanning the darkness around him for an escape route.

Almost immediately the white searchlight washed over him again, pinning him to his bike like a moth in a spotlight. Jacob swore and half-closed his eyes, struggling to see in the gloom as the light destroyed his night vision, filling his world with white static.

And in that flash of light, a vision hit him. A young man on a bike, just like his. A strong-boned, handsome face contorted in alarm. Then pain stabbed into his wrists, his ankles, his groin, as snaking black tendrils of wire tore themselves free of the motorbike and punched through his skin, digging through his flesh and winding themselves around his very bones, deep inside his body. The metal

beneath him softened in a flash of heat and he screamed in pain as his exposed skin fused to it, literally melting him into the bike. A sensation of speed rushed over him, then a lurch in the pit of his stomach as the ground dropped away.

Then a tree trunk, flying toward him as unstoppably as fate...

Then, in a flash, Jacob was back on the road again, the sound of police sirens

ringing in his ears. Jacob slammed on the Kawasaki's brakes as hard as he could, not even aware that he was screaming as he clamped his body to the bike, willing it not to overturn as he powered down as hard as he could. The world tilted as the bike bucked across the road, hit a concrete incline at the forecourt of a gas station and zoomed up the ramp. Panicking, Jacob wrestled with the bike, now out of control, white-knuckling the grips as it spun and jumped across the broken asphalt of the gas station. Smoke poured out of the tires as he hauled on the wheel, dragging it around in a tight circle and squeezing the brakes as hard as his numb fingers would let him.

The engine cut out with a bang and the bike shuddered to a halt.

Jacob threw his leg down, catching the weight of the bike before it fell and a moment later he levered down the kickstand with his other heel, then leaned the bike over. His entire body was shaking, vibrating with adrenaline and shock. It took him a moment or two to unclamp his fingers from around the handlebar grips, then he swung his leg over the saddle and staggered away from it.

Overhead, the helicopter buzzed down toward him, loud and angry, like a demented wasp.

Jacob reeled.

His father had died when his vehicle had hit a tree.

What kind of sicko vision had that been?

It had seemed so real.

The police cars crunched up the slope behind him and screeched to a halt in a cloud of smoke. A voice broke the breathless silence.

"Get your hands in the air. Right now!"

Slowly, Jacob turned. The cop had jumped out of his car and the muzzle of his gun was centered right on Jacob's chest.

The cop clicked off the safety catch, ready to fire.

Popularity, Henry thought, was a lot like beer. It went to your head and there was no such thing as too much. He flashed a quick grin at Nikki, who was sitting beside him on a lab stool, sharing a drink and a quick breather from the dance floor.

She did not smile back.

Shrugging, he picked up his drink and studied the assembled crowd, in the manner of an anthropologist watching chimps at the zoo. The room was packed shoulder to shoulder with lithe, leather-clad bodies and the party was really beginning to heat up, in more ways than one. Henry's gaze wandered over the crowd, marveling at the sheer diversity of people who had turned up for this thing. Jen's frequent secret-location parties always made the top of the list on the unofficial school year calendar, and everybody who was anybody took great pains to be there, taking full advantage of the free drink and the opportunity to be seen.

Because that, after all, was what it was all about.

Nikki, on the other hand, quite clearly didn't want to be seen. Henry glanced at her enquiringly as she wriggled on her lab stool, pulling down her skirt for the twentieth time in as many minutes. He followed her gaze and saw that her new jock friend had rejoined his buddies over by the far wall, who were giving Nikki sidelong glances and nudging their friend.

Henry transferred his gaze to Nikki. She was watching the jocks out of the corner of her eye, sipping nervously at her drink. The white bandages on her arm glowed brightly in the semi-darkness.

Henry gazed at the bandages thoughtfully. He could have sworn that they were on her other arm that morning.

One of the jocks made a dirty comment to his friend and the group laughed, a nasty sound in the close atmosphere. Henry glowered at them, making sure that they knew he was watching them, then banged a plastic drink mixer against his beer glass, making Nikki visibly jump. "Here's to friends, family and having one hell of a good time. Cheers."

He clinked his glass against Nikki's and took a long gulp of the cold beer, which sloshed down into his stomach to join the four that were already residing there. He licked his lips as the room spun gently around him and glanced at Nikki, who was readjusting her bandage for the umpteenth time that evening. "You know, it's so sad that you feel you have to do that," he said, watching her closely.

"Do what?" Nikki looked up at Henry and just for a moment, her expression flickered.

"What?" she said again, forcing a smile.

"Cover for her." Henry carelessly gestured with his glass, slopping a good quarter of it down himself. Nikki followed his gaze to see Ella sitting all by herself at the other end of the bar, staring moodily at an empty space on the dancefloor, a wistful expression on her face.

"What do you mean?" Nikki was genuinely bemused.

"Well, she's gonna sit there being miserable all evening, so you'll have to have all the fun for her. It's so obvious, and deeply, deeply sad."

Nikki gave him a shy smile, looking relieved. "Hey, I'm her friend. That's what I'm here for." She peeped at Ella over the top of her drink. "What's she so moody about tonight?"

"Three guesses."

Nikki stared blankly at Henry, then jerked her chin in understanding. "Still Dimitri?"

"Who else is there for her to obsess about?"

Nikki stared directly at Henry, a hint of a mischievous grin on her lips. "Good point."

"Hey! Watch it, smartass. I'm cute too, you know." Henry lifted a boot and pushed Nikki away from him on her stool. She giggled and slid back toward him.

"So—think we should go put her out of her misery?"

"Nah. Give the poor lamb a minute to herself." Henry pushed his white-streaked hair back out of his eyes, then rubbed a hand thoughtfully across his jaw. All girls were a mystery to him, but Ella in particular seemed so full of secrets. Henry wished that she would talk to him, or at the very least make out with him.

But she was a lost cause, as far as he could figure her. She'd never get her head out of her ass long enough to notice that there were other men in the world besides Dimitri.

Like him, for instance.

Henry shook his head and sighed. He was such a loser, obsessing over women he couldn't have. He was as bad as her, in a way.

He turned his head and stole a glance at Nikki. She, on the other hand, was very available. In fact it almost shocked him how available she was. With one drink inside her, she was broadcasting it to every guy in the room. It was a good job she had him here to protect her.

One flaw in the plan. He was blind drunk. Even the sorority girls at the bar were starting to look appealing to him right now. But Nikki was far cuter than any of them. And she had the most amazing, perfect, incredible pair of...

"Hey!"

"Huh?" Henry realized he was staring and glanced back up guiltily. Nikki was gazing down at him, a playful expression on her face. And it was such a pretty face. Cute button nose, pale hazel eyes hiding beneath too much kohl eyeliner. A wide, generous mouth that was currently wrapped around a green bendy straw, as she vacuumed up the last few drops of her melon martini.

Treacherous thoughts stirred in Henry's brain and he tried to concentrate on something else. They'd been through so much together. It would be weird to think of her as anything other than just a friend.

Or would it?

Nikki surprised herself by hiccupping and giggled in what Henry regarded as an insanely cute way.

Okay. Forget the "just friends" bit. Man, she was hot.

It was funny. The more beer he drank, the hotter she got.

Henry licked his lips, feeling sweat start to bead on his brow. It couldn't hurt to ask. "Wanna dance?"

"Sweetie! I thought you'd never ask."

"Lead the way then."

Henry took Nikki's hand, led her through the crowds onto the dancefloor. "Too bad Matt's not here to see this. He's probably at

home in bed by now. Loser."

On the dancefloor, Ella swayed dreamily to the music, her arms wrapped tight around Dimitri. The world faded away around her and the pulse of the music got slower, slower, s-l-o-w-e-r, lulling her into a contented trance. This was where she was meant to be—in Dimitri's arms—and she felt warm and safe, and more contented than she had felt in a long time.

She breathed in surreptitiously. Dimitri smelled so good. She wondered what he would look like naked. An unconscious giggle escaped from her lips and she quickly smothered it, feigning a yawn that quickly turned into a real one. The alcohol in her system was making her sleepy and her eyelids felt so heavy. It was late at night and right now, she wanted nothing more than to lay her head down on Dimitri's shoulder and close her eyes.

So she did just that.

Behind her back, Dimitri's glass-taloned hand crept slowly upwards, his fingers caressing Ella's hair, then her back. A stray beam of candlelight glinted off the end of his razor-sharp claws as they slid over her soft skin, then hooked under the strap of her bra, lifting it gently off her shoulder. Dimitri smiled to himself, his face buried in Ella's hair.

His fingers moved further up, brushing over her jugular.

"Hey—are you okay?"

Sitting on her barstool, Ella blinked and jerked her head up, snapped out of her happy little daydream. The diminutive Ralph was standing in front of her, shifting uneasily from foot to foot. He was almost dwarfed by the enormous jug of beer he held in both hands like a sporting trophy, with a giant, sparkly, cocktail umbrella.

"What?" said Ella, glaring down at Ralph. Jeez, she couldn't even get five minutes of peace in this place.

"It's just..." Ralph gulped, his face pale. He glanced down at his hands, then his words came out in a rush. "You've been sitting there looking all sad for like, ten minutes now, and I'm worried 'bout you

'cos you usually look so cheerful. At first I thought that maybe I'd upset you, then I talked to your friend Jen and she said that maybe you were just tired, but then I suddenly realized that perhaps you were feeling weird 'cos you got arrested today, and so I told her that, and she got this real funny look on her face, and then her boyfriend..."

"Whoa, whoa, whoa." Ella put her glass down on the bar with a thump. "What did you just say?"

"What, about you being tired?"

"No, the other thing." Ella swiveled around on her bar stool so that she was facing him and fixed the quivering boy with a piercing look.

"Ralph, what did you say to Jen?"

"About you being arrested? I just told her what I saw."

"You saw?"

"Yeah, I was there, remember? When the cop was taking you to his car? You looked up at me and I waved to you." Ralph smiled dreamily. "I think that the sun was in your eyes or something 'cos you didn't wave back, but then looked over and gave me this amazing little smile..." Ralph's voice tailed off as he saw the expression on Ella's face. "Remember?"

Ella rubbed her head, suddenly feeling very tired. "No, Ralph, sorry. It's been a long day."

Ralph paused, then glanced up at Ella shyly. "That's okay. Hey. I don't s'pose you'd like to come see me play on Saturday? Only we've got this big match down at the Arena with free food and cheerleaders and everything, and I could pick you up at your house if you didn't want to drive, and—oh." Ralph stepped back as Ella stood up, her eyes scanning the room with a sudden urgency. "Do you have to go now?"

"Yes, Ralph, I have to go."

Ralph's face fell. "Okay then. I hope you have a lovely night, Ella. Enjoy the party and I hope you feel better soon."

"Yeah whatever." Ella grabbed her jacket.

"Oh, and Ella?"

"What?"

"My name's Peter, not Ralph."

Peter took the umbrella out of his beer and tossed it into an ash tray, then turned and shuffled off into the crowd.

Ella watched him go, frowning, then shook herself and quickly strode off toward the door. Whatever. She had to find Jen and nix that rumor before it got started. If she didn't find her soon, then by morning the whole school would know.

Ella walked quickly up the steps and pushed her way through the charred door. The darkness on the other side made her pause for a moment, but then she plucked up her courage and started forward into the blackness with confidence.

Five minutes later and she was still walking. She couldn't see a thing. She had been stupid not to bring a candle to help her find her way out. The exit door seemed to have vanished without trace. Maybe she'd gone past it?

Ella sighed to herself, then turned on the spot and walked back in the direction she'd come from. She would just have to go back to the party room, and start again.

Another five minutes of hard walking later, she was beginning to seriously freak out. There was no way she'd walked this far away from the main door. She strained her ears, listening for the thump of the music from the party, but the thick metal door had muffled and deadened the sound until it was nothing more than a directionless noise, coming from somewhere underfoot.

Okay. Think.

Ella stopped dead and stretched out her other arm, groping for the opposite wall. Her fingertips wafted through empty space.

Where the hell was she?

Ella closed her eyes and counted to ten, more annoyed than scared. Each second she was in this place was another moment for Jen to call up one of her gossip-monger friends and spread the word about her. She now realized why Jen had left the party so early. The walls were so thick, she probably hadn't been able to get a signal on

her cellphone down there. She had some hot gossip and she just couldn't wait to tell everyone.

Ella started walking again, one hand on the wall, marching forward in the blackness with increasing urgency. Jen just didn't think about what she was doing. She never did. She dearly loved to be the center of attention, to be the one in the know. Gossip was like oxygen to that girl. She swore that she didn't spread rumors maliciously, but calling up ten friends and swearing them each to secrecy was akin to taking out a full-page color ad in the *Springwood Times*.

She should know better than that.

Ella's light-sensitized eyes made out a dim red glow far up ahead of her. She paused, then started marching resolutely toward it.

"I said *hands in the air!*"

Jacob stood silhouetted in the spotlight of the chopper, staring into the muzzle of the gun pointed at his chest. The light bounced off the cop cars surrounding him, turning them a glowing white, like a beacon of law in the darkness.

Shit, talk about trigger happy.

Jacob ran the tip of his tongue over his dry lips and stared at the cop. He let his hands drop to his sides and flexed his fingers, breathing shallowly. Otherwise, he didn't move a muscle.

"Right now!"

Jacob held the cop's gaze for a moment, inspecting him with a kind of detached intensity. Sad, slightly sunken eyes held perhaps thirty years of disappointment with the world. Pants, a couple of inches too short. Sandy, badly-cut hair. Flushed face, his forehead glistening with sweat. Probably had a young kid, and a wife who ironed his shirts and temped on minimum wage.

Jacob dropped his gaze to the cop's gun, currently leveled at his chest. Standard issue nine millimeter. Customized barrel. Pistol grip polished, till it gleamed like the sun. Vegas showgirl decal slapped onto one side, now tatty with age.

Despite his bluster, Jacob saw that the cop's gun was shaking
The cop was afraid.

Of what? Him? An unarmed kid in a dirty nightgown?

"Hands-up—*now!*"

Jacob closed his eyes and breathed deeply, feeling his confusion and exhaustion blend together in his mind like a deep scarlet whirlpool. His head swam and for a moment black speckles danced in front of his eyes as a great wave of tiredness swept through him.

"Kid, don't be stupid."

There it was. That thing in the back of his head, exploding into life and swamping his brain. The thing he had tried so hard to hide all his life. It was hard and cold and hot all at the same time, and it glowed a blinding white, like a ball of radiation at the back of his skull.

Jacob didn't know what it was, but it scared the crap out of him.

A second cop jumped out of the car behind the first and aimed his own gun at Jacob, his hair whipping in the wind of the rotors as the helicopter hovered above him. "You heard him. Put your hands in the air and kneel down slowly."

"Or what?" Jacob's voice was a dry whisper. His eyes were still closed. "You'll shoot me?"

"I don't wanna shoot you, kid. But I'll ask you again. Hands in the air. Right *now!*"

"No," said Jacob quietly. He felt the anger start to build inside him, like oily waves crashing against a dam. They wanted to take him back to Westin Hills and lock him up for no reason other than they didn't understand him. Five years he'd been locked down in that dump.

Five years. That time was gone forever and he could never get it back. He should have been at school, going to proms and bars and hanging out with his friends, dating girls and driving around in a beat-up car with chromed headlamps and blue flames painted over the wheels.

Instead, he had spent it staring at the inside of a blank wall day after day after day, enduring tests and choking back their goddamn zombie juice like a good dog, all the while hoping and praying that

whatever was wrong with him would get better so he could go back to his life and be normal, like the rest of the kids.

Five years...

"This is your final warning..."

Jacob's fists clenched and he raised his eyes again. The thing in his brain screamed at him, begging to be released. He ignored the first cop and turned to the newcomer, an overweight man with small eyes and graying hair. "Fuck the both of you. I'm going home."

The cop's eyes got smaller still. He bristled, raising his gun to head height. "Don't make me do this, son."

Jacob sighed, feeling resignation bubble up within him. Then he glanced down and pointed. "Do what? Shoot me with your safety on?"

Both cops' eyes flicked downward to their guns. It was an instinctive response and he'd been counting on it.

For a split second, their attention wavered.

Electrifying his nerves, Jacob released the dam in his head.

The cops screamed.

TEN

A flickering red light lit up the darkness of the boiler room, filling the gloom with dancing shadows, like the spirits of the dead.

The room was hot. Here and there, small jets of steam hissed out of the pipes, immediately evaporating in the dry heat. A jumble of nondescript machinery filled the corners of the room, tangled with wires and power cords and the remains of broken tools. The air was thick with dust, and spider webs draped the corners and crevices, weaving a dusty white skin around the rotting copper pipes, turning inorganic machinery into spectral white shapes.

There was a whimper in the darkness.

Steam hissed above the clank of machinery and a long drawn-out grating sound resembled an iron door being dragged shut. A sudden wash of red light flooded the room, throwing a shadow across the walls and up onto the ceiling, like a giant black spider.

The shadow of a man.

The shadow moved across the ceiling, slid along the far wall, then grew smaller, as though the man was walking forward, away from the source of the light.

Another whimper sounded, low and hopeless.

The man paused briefly, then moved on.

A workbench sat in the corner of the room, by the stairs that led up to a heavy iron door. A dirty curtain hung down from the ceiling, blocking the view of the door. There was a set of silver knives on the worktop, arranged neatly according to size, running from the largest to smallest, like a window display. One of the larger knives still had the store tag on it. To the left of them sat a large stack of scrapbooks, along with a white plastic bag from a grocery store, the top tied in a knot.

Footsteps sounded in the darkness. A moment later, the bag was tossed aside and a book was slammed down on the bench, a large tome with black covers and an embossed gold spine.

A yearbook.

Dirty hands reached down and opened the front cover. A callused thumb ran down the index page, then the man pulled the book open at the center pages, cracking the spine, and gazed hungrily down. Dozens of black and white faces beamed out. Children's faces, no older than sixteen or seventeen. Good looking, happy faces, with shiny hair, perfect skin and pearly white.

High school kids

The man reached up and scratched the stubble on his chin thoughtfully, staring hungrily down at the pictures.

Pretty, pretty kids.

So young, so perfect.

They had their whole lives ahead of them, their clear eyes and wide smiles reflecting a boundless optimism that was alien to the man. The kids had no idea what the future held for them and mostly didn't care, so long as it involved fun things like football and cheerleading and cars and sex.

The man's hands tightened on the cover of the yearbook.

He had never had those years.

No smiling, happy faces for him.

The man flicked rapidly through the pages, feeling his long-dormant hatred start to build. The kids were so cheerful, so young, so fresh. A stab of black jealousy shot through him, like a cold snake winding its way down his backbone.

His high school years had been wasted, spent in a haze of self-loathing, of trudging through life while his peers had got all the breaks. They hung out, went to parties, got laid, got on with life without so much as a second thought, as though it was the most simple thing in the world.

It seemed to come so easily to them, almost like taking a breath.

Whereas with him, everything had been an effort. He had scraped through classes, somehow, but it hadn't been enough.

Not by a long shot.

For as every kid knew, school wasn't about learning stuff.

It was about being popular, being liked, being accepted.

He had never been any of those things.

It had started in kindergarten, where the kids teased him for being adopted. Even now, as an adult with a family, a job, a wife, he still heard their voices in his head. He couldn't shut them out, no matter how hard he tried. "See that boy? His mummy didn't like him, so she threw him out. Just like the garbage."

Endless children's laughter, ringing in his head.

His stepfather had beaten him each time he had run away and eventually he had just given up.

But he had tried. Oh God, had he tried.

He had tried to fit in and had been rejected. He had tried to be liked and ended up being despised. He had tried to be good and everything had turned out bad.

High school had been the worst. Here, all his neuroses and problems had been thrown sharply into focus, dragged squirming out into the light and held up for all to laugh at. For this was a time of proms and parties, of being expected to be at his best, when he looked and felt his absolute worst.

Sometimes, he would creep back into the empty upstairs classroom during lunch break, turn out the lights, then just sit and watch the kids out in the playground down below. He would look on in envy as the boys ran around on the grassy field, shouting to one another and messing around with baseballs and bikes while the girls sat on the wall watching them, pointing and giggling to one another. They never seemed to actually achieve anything, but they all seemed to be having such a great time. Then, one by one, couples would pair off, cliques would form and the next thing he knew, he was the boy who sat by himself every lunchtime, rejected yet again.

They had no right to be so happy when he was so miserable.

No right.

The harder he tried, the worse things got. He just had no idea how to fit in with the other kids. Social interaction was a mystery to him. He would watch them, try to analyze their behavior, to unpick what they were doing so that he could learn it and do it too, but the harder he tried the more he was teased, and in the end he had given up and accepted his role as the social outcast.

The one who didn't belong.

The freak.

The man reached down, picked up the smallest knife from the workbench and absent mindedly cleaned the grime from his fingernails with the sharp tip. As he gazed down at the row and rows of smiling faces, an image welled up in his mind. The man shook his head to try and dislodge it, but it was no good. He was seventeen again, and he was having his own yearbook photo taken. He had tried to skip school to avoid the ordeal, but had been caught by a mean faced teacher at the main gate and marched back up the drive to school.

The resultant picture had shown a sallow-faced, skinny youth, with limp hair, pale skin, acne and a thin, grudging smile that didn't reach his eyes. He looked as beaten and dejected as he felt. He had hated the picture with a passion, and had invested a considerable amount of time and effort tracking down every copy of that yearbook and burning them.

It hadn't helped, though. He saw that image every time he looked in the mirror. It showed him for what he was: a loser, a failure. He failed in everything he tried to do, from dating to friends to work.

He was a failure and he hated everyone who wasn't.

Especially the kids.

A drop of blood splashed down onto the yearbook, staining the page. The man grimaced and sucked on his finger, then put the knife down onto the bench.

A whimper came from the girl sitting bound and gagged in the corner of the room. The man swung around to face her, his nostrils flaring in contempt. She was blonde, no older than fifteen and was terrified out of her mind. Tears slipped silently down her cheeks, soaking the gag that silenced her. She was wearing a thin green gown, such as might be found on the inmates of a hospital.

Or a mental asylum.

The man studied her impassively for a moment.

Then he turned back to the yearbook.

The blood ran down the page, tracing a crimson line between the pictures. The man brushed it off with a finger and turned back a

couple of pages, going through the alphabet until he found the surname he was looking for.

Ah. There she was.

Perfect.

The picture showed another young girl, glossy haired and high-cheekboned. The name beneath read: "Elizabeth Harris."

The man ran tongue over his dry lips. Then he leaned forward and picked up the knife again, then carefully scored around the edges of the picture. Licking his dirty fingers, he picked up the picture and laid it in the palm of his hand, studying it through narrowed eyes....

"Jack!"

The man jumped, spinning around and dropping the picture. It fluttered to the floor, and he quickly scooped it up and stuffed it into his pocket. Then he turned and ripped back the curtain, marching over to the stairs.

At the top, the door was open a crack. Bright yellow light spilled down, illuminating the dusty darkness. A woman's face shyly peered around the edge of the door. She was thin as a mouse, with wispy blonde hair and a worried, pinched face. "Dinner's ready, honey."

Jack Kane grabbed hold of the metal railing with a white-knuckled fist and turned his scowling face upwards into the light. Muscles in his arm bunched as he fought to contain his fury. "I'm working," he growled. "I told you not to disturb me when I'm working!"

The woman took a step backward, her hands fluttering in confusion. "But dinner's on the table, and I just thought you might—"

"I'm not hungry."

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to—"

"Get out of here!" Kane bellowed.

Kane spun on his heel and ducked back under the curtain, muttering oaths to himself. A few seconds later, he heard the door click shut again. The sound of muffled sobbing floated quietly down the metal stairs.

Jack ignored it. Stupid bitch. What did she know?

He pulled the crumpled picture out of his pocket and tossed it down onto the bench, then pulled one of the scrapbooks out of the pile and opened it at random. The pages were crammed with dozens

of newspaper cuttings, torn and yellowed with age. He flicked through the pages. All the cuttings were about the same case, the same person. Kane gazed down at them, his eye roving over the dramatic headlines.

"Springwood Slasher Strikes Again!"

"Lock Up Your Children!"

"Thirteenth Child Missing—Parents Hold Candlelight Vigil."

Kane turned the pages till he came to the last cutting. He read it through, carefully, as he had done a thousand times before this day.

"Krueger Strikes Again... From Beyond The Grave?"

This was the last cutting. After that, nothing.

It was almost as if someone was covering it up.

And they *were* covering it up. Kane knew it all off by heart. He had stumbled across the case by accident, whilst working for the Springwood Police Department.

After that, it had become almost an obsession.

He knew all about the mysterious deaths of Tina Gray, her boyfriend Rob and all the dozens of other kids who had died on Elm Street, slaughtered by an invisible maniac in their dreams.

Oh yes. He knew all about what went on at 1428 Elm Street.

Donald Thompson had lived at that address. Thompson was a police officer, and had been part of the crowd of righteous parents and town officials who had gone to Krueger's murderous lair. He had been the first to throw a Molotov cocktail in through the window, wreaking a terrible kind of justice when the courts could do nothing.

Freddy was burned alive in his own killing room.

But then, later, the other deaths had started. Shocking, brutal, inexplicable. The older Elm Street kids had started to die, one by one. People tried to blame the deaths on drugs, on teenage craziness, on anything other than Freddy, but Kane knew what really went on. He listened to the whispers at the police station, hacked into files, read secret documents.

It *was* a cover up. For Freddy had come back from the dead, Kane knew it. As bizarre as it seemed, Freddy was punishing his killers by slaughtering their kids.

Soon, all the children of the original Elm Street parents were dead.

But that didn't stop Freddy.

Nothing stopped Freddy.

It was that goddamn house. 1428 Elm Street. For each new family who moved in, Freddy would find a way to come back and continue his reign of terror. All it took was for one kid to discover his name and Freddy would start appearing in their dreams, terrorizing them, using them to spread the fear before butchering them in their sleep.

So the cops and officials had got together, clamped down on the town, hauled any kid who found out about Freddy off to Westin Hills, dosed them up on Hypnocil to stop them from dreaming. They hoped to break the chain, to starve Freddy of the fear he so desperately needed to survive.

But it hadn't worked that way.

Freddy would not be beaten. With each year that passed, the more vicious his killings became. The cops were scared shitless, all out of ideas about how to save their town.

Kane had taken advantage of his position of power. Getting his new identity as a mental health worker had been as simple as going into the tow records, rejigging a few of his qualifications, then *wham!* Instant promotion. He worked with the kids up at Westin, the so-called crazies, finding out what they knew. Most of them were too far gone to be of much use, their minds destroyed through years of untested, unlicensed Hypnocil "therapy," unhinged by years of dreamless sleep. But Kane worked with them all, hoping to discover the secret of Freddy. Then, with one kid, he had struck gold. And no one suspected a thing.

For good old Jack Kane *cared* about the kids.

Those goddamn kids...

Kane's eyes glistened in the dark. Freddy was free to maim, torture and kill the ones he despised—and he got away with it. What power! Even after they killed him, he didn't stop, his power seeming to grow greater with each passing day. Nobody bullied him. No one made fun of him. He could do what he wanted to whoever he wanted and nobody could stop him.

Jack Kane would have killed to possess power like that.

"Krueger, you old devil," Kane whispered to himself. He stroked the worn cuttings fondly, running his eye down the page like a caress. "How did you do it?"

He cast a thoughtful eye over his own workshop. The knives on the workbench. The gardening gloves. The girl bound and gagged beneath the boiler.

Everything was in place.

But still, something was missing.

He pulled something out from under the cuttings books, a case file, and tossed it down next to the picture. The name on the file read "Jacob Harris."

Kane smiled. Then he picked up the largest knife and got back to work.

The wind ruffled Jacob's blood-caked hair as he gunned the Kawasaki down the dark highway, leaving the town center far behind him. The orange street lights of the highway washed over his face—dark, light, dark, light. He had long since stopped feeling the cold of the night, and now all he could feel was the rumble of the road beneath him and the tension in his arms as he gripped the handlebars, squeezing them tight in a vain attempt to get the screaming out of his head.

His bloodstained gown was gone, and in its place were a pair of black trousers, belted at the waist, and a white vest top with the police department's official seal stamped across the chest. His feet were snug inside a pair of thick-soled army boots, which were a couple of sizes too big but still serviceable. Patches of dried blood adhered to his forearms, but he'd scraped his hair back off his face with a rubber band, and now looked almost presentable.

If not entirely sane.

Jacob glanced into his rearview mirror, then shrugged his shoulders to readjust the backpack slung across his shoulders. The bag contained his two new pistols wrapped in a tan jacket, a couple

of boxes of ammo and a box of Crispy Cream doughnuts that he'd found on the back seat of the second cop car.

For the first time in over five years, he had a purpose.

The glove box of the cop car had provided him with more than enough quarters to call a cellphone. Kane's voice on the other end had been strained, but Jacob had a very strong feeling that he'd been expecting his call. They'd spoken briefly and then Kane had given him the address of a nearby strip joint, with strict instructions to ring him again from a call box across the street before entering the parking lot.

He hadn't said anything about Freddy.

Jacob stared ahead at the road while his head swam with a thousand conflicting thoughts. Why had Kane helped him escape? What did he want? How had he managed to smuggle the gun in past security at Westin?

Something nagged at Jacob's attention, and his focus snapped back to the road. The Kawasaki was slowing down, the engine whining as though something was dragging behind the bike. Jacob glanced into the rearview mirror, but saw nothing.

He applied the brake, then twisted the throttle again. The engine snarled at him and the bike jumped, its frame rattling as though it were being pelted by invisible blows.

Seriously freaked out, Jacob braked again and edged the bike into the slow lane. They were approaching Springwood's town limits and he was going slower and slower by the second. He peeked at the dials in front of him—he had almost a full tank of gas, so why was he slowing down?

It was almost as if the bike didn't want to go any further.

A road sign loomed in the darkness and a very familiar name jumped out at Jacob. A shock of realization passed through him.

He was nearly home.

Home.

He hadn't realized he was so close. All those years of incarceration at Westin Hills and he'd been just a mile or so from his own house.

A treacherous thought snuck into the back of his head. He was so close to home—surely it wouldn't hurt to just drive by and have a

look? He couldn't go in, of course—that would be the first place they'd look for him. But if the two cop cars and the helicopter represented Springwood's best attempts to recapture him, he figured he'd have a good half-hour before the Neanderthals back at HQ figured out that their patrolmen were missing.

Jacob leaned the bike into a tight bank, turning off the highway and streaking down the exit ramp toward the suburbs. Warehouses lined the street in an ugly sprawl of architectural incontinence, empty corporate shells surrounded by chain-link fences. There was a gap of several streets, then the industrial buildings gave way to condominiums, then small apartments, then finally graceful white houses flanked by tall trees.

Home.

The houses that lined the streets were all darkened and Jacob felt his hope fade a little, then rekindle as he saw the lights were on in one particular house. He drove up to the curb, wheeled his bike around into a space between two cars and killed the engine.

Sitting back in the saddle, he gazed up at the house that for thirteen years had been his home—a simple white-painted house, with wooden railings and a swing on the front porch.

He'd missed it so much.

In his five years of incarceration, the thought of home had been the one thing that kept him going. He had so often dreamed of a time when he'd be allowed to go home and get on with his life. He'd pictured a thousand times how he would go running up the front path, where his parents would sweep him up into their arms, laughing and crying with joy, before taking him inside for fresh home-baked cookies and maybe a trip to the park, a long walk and a chance to catch up on the last five years.

A wave of darkness swept over Jacob as reality hit him. It could never happen, of course. His father was dead and his mother was missing. She had disappeared shortly after they had taken him to Westin Hills and nobody knew where she had gone.

But still, it was a nice dream...

Just then, the kitchen light snapped on and a silhouette was revealed at the window.

A very familiar silhouette.

Jacob felt his heart speed up as he saw a dark figure stop by the window, then turn and stare out at him. It was a woman, but it wasn't his grandma, Mrs Jordan—the witch-woman who had stolen him from his mom as soon as he'd been born, proclaiming that she was an unfit and dangerous parent.

It was his real mother.

Alice.

She was here! After all this time, his mother was here!

He had been lied to. But why?

Jacob felt a surge of longing bubble up in his chest, blotting out the questions in his mind. He was off the bike and loping across the lawn toward her before his brain caught up with what he was doing.

How was this even possible? Had she known, somehow, that he had escaped and that he would find his way back here? Could it have even been her who had bribed Kane to put the gun under his pillow in the first place?

Screw the cops. He had to find out.

He paused behind a bush, gazing up at the kitchen window. Closer, he could see his mother's face, backlit by the kitchen light. She looked older and sadder, but was still as beautiful as she was in the picture they had given him, her heart-shaped face framed by an unruly mop of soft curls, scraped back under a black bandana.

A moment later and his mother's eyes met his. Her mouth opened in surprise, then curved up into a smile of incredulous delight. She waved to Jacob frantically, then put a finger to her lips and glanced around behind her, as though making sure the coast was clear. Then she pointed a finger at the front door as if to say, "Stay there. I'm coming out."

She clicked out the light and vanished from view.

Jacob stopped in his tracks, wavering uncertainly. Then he darted across to a climbing wisteria bush and crouched down behind it. He waited, listening as hard as he could. The road was silent save for the chirruping of crickets and the faint rustle of the midnight wind.

Jacob's eyes swept up the road, listening for the tell-tale sound of police sirens.

Nothing.

Reassured, Jacob pushed himself to his feet, then began marching across the lawn to the front of the house, brushing the dirt off his pants. He only wished that he'd looked more presentable. After all, it had been five years. He wanted to make a good first impression.

He stepped off the lawn onto the path, and began walking up toward it. He was halfway up the path when the front door creaked open. Overjoyed, Jacob rushed forward.

Then he stopped, staring in horror.

Freddy Krueger stood in the open doorway of his home.

Bold and brazen.

Grinning at him.

Every muscle in Jacob's body froze and he felt freezing tendrils of shock race through him. Choking back a cry of fury, he stared up at the putrefying madman who had ruined his life. Krueger's mouth was pulled upwards into a sneer and his arms were crossed, his finger-knives resting comfortably on his shoulders like spiny metal wings. His head was down, his wide-brimmed fedora hat throwing a shadow over his face. His eyes gleamed red, as if lit from within by hellfire.

"No!" Jacob swallowed and backed away, not daring to take his eyes off the grinning killer for a split second.

How could this be happening? How? He had taken a double dose of Hypnocil just a few short hours ago, back at Westin Hills. There was no way that bastard could have got through to him if he was awake.

"Ah crap!" Jacob felt the world closing in on him. He spun on his heel and began racing back to his motorbike, as fast as his legs would take him. He knew in his gut that it was useless, but he'd be damned if he was going to give the sonofabitch the satisfaction of knowing he'd won.

Behind him, he heard the sound of insane laughter tearing through the still night air. "AhahahahahahaHA!"

Then came a sound buried so deeply in Jacob's psyche that just hearing it made him feel like he was five years old again.

Screeeeccccchhhhhh!

"Fuck!" Jacob redoubled his efforts, sprinting across the lawn. Fear poured through him in an icy flood. He jumped the low picket fence and hit the sidewalk running, putting every ounce of his strength into his legs in an effort to put distance between himself and Krueger.

But something was wrong. Something felt weird. Jacob glanced down at himself. His clothes had suddenly become about five sizes too big, and were whipping and flapping around him as he ran. Not only had his clothes grown, but he seemed to have shrunk. The ground was only four feet or so below him, and his legs seemed curiously weak and spindly.

Then he realized what was wrong.

He *was* five years old again.

Little Jacob paused, his lungs heaving. He turned back toward Krueger and raised a furious finger in his direction. With his outsized clothes flapping around him, he reached the Kawasaki and stopped dead. The hopelessness of his situation suddenly dawned on him.

He was five years old.

How the hell was he going to ride a motorcycle?

Gritting his teeth, Jacob tore off down the road into the darkness. Fear gave him an extra jolt of speed, as the street lights flickered and crackled above him.

He had not gone more than a dozen yards before he realized he was slowing down again. He came to a halt, his legs spinning frantically on the ground without moving him forward an inch, as in a cartoon. Then he started drifting backward, although he was still trying to run. Confused, Jacob threw a look over his shoulder and saw the reason why. Krueger was standing in the doorway, his hand raised before him in a fist, as though he was holding onto something.

It was Jacob's shadow.

Krueger was holding onto his goddamn shadow!

And then he was moving backward as Krueger started reeling him in, all the while laughing uproariously. The harder Jacob struggled to free himself, the harder Krueger laughed, until the rooftops were ringing with the sound of his foul cackle.

Jacob fell to his knees as he was dragged backward, tears of anger and frustration running down his little five year-old face. His fingers scrabbled on the concrete path, searching for a handhold, scraping the skin from his knuckles. But it was no good. Within seconds he was back outside his house, dragged bodily down the path. As he kicked and struggled the landscape around him blurred, a white picket fence rising from the lawn like a corpse breaking out of a grave, while the features of the house shifted around as though an army of ghosts was performing a high speed renovation. Jacob watched as four embossed numbers exuded themselves from the wall, clicking neatly into place.

1.

4.

2.

8.

Jacob looked up at the numbers and his soul froze.

1428 Elm Street.

No.

Not that house.

Anything but that house...

Even as Jacob watched, the lights in the house went out, then *ka-boom!*

The windows exploded outwards in a shower of spinning glass shards. Flames ignited in the empty window frames, leaping upward and filling the night air with the sounds of crackling and spitting.

The front door creaked open and blood started to pour out. It gushed down the front steps in a crimson tide, then began flowing stickily from the windows, oozing out of the very walls. It flooded down toward Jacob, flowed around him, over him. He tasted its coppery tang in his mouth and spat, repulsed. But more poured over him, drenching his hair, stinging his eyes, as he was dragged backward.

Freddy Krueger threw back his head and laughed as he hauled Jacob the last few feet up the path, watching his struggles with contempt. He reached down and grabbed the blood-slicked young boy by the hair, and hauled him to his feet.

"Jacob. You weren't trying to run away from daddy, were you?"

"Get the fuck off me! You're not my father!" Jacob kicked out at Freddy as hard as he could and twisted in his grasp, striving to break free. Freddy swung his finger knives downward with a flourish—*ssssching!*—and smacked Jacob around the head.

"You kiss your mother with that mouth, boy?" Freddy laughed and hoisted him up into the air. "No? Would you like *me* to?" His tongue snaked out of his mouth and he wagged it obscenely, then broke into a peal of delighted laughter.

"You even dream about going near my mother, fuckhead, you're gonna be taking your balls home in a bag!" Jacob spat.

"Strong words, tough guy." Freddy hoisted Jacob up higher, inspecting him closely. Then his smile dropped off his face as suddenly as if it had been sliced off. "Okay, here's the deal, you little brat. I know what you're doing, stopping everyone's dreams." Freddy touched his fingerblade to Jacob's throat and the boy suddenly grew very still, staring up at Freddy with hatred in his eyes.

Freddy sniggered and pressed his blade deeper into Jacob's throat. Jacob winced as blood started to flow. "You can't keep it up forever, Jacob. Let people start dreaming again—and I'll let you live."

"So kill me." Jacob locked eyes with Freddy, fighting the pain and the fear. He had nothing left to lose.

Krueger laughed. "Ain't gonna happen, kiddo. I need you alive. How else can I get through to the kids? You're the only one that remembers me."

"The cops remember you," snapped Jacob. "Go fuck with them."

"Ha! You're a funny guy." Freddy leaned closer to Jacob's ear. Jacob held his breath as the stench of rotting flesh washed over him. "Doesn't work like that. You know it. I know it." He dropped his voice to a dry whisper. "I just want the kids. Bring me the kids and you can live forever, like me."

"Screw you!" Jacob swung his leg back and kicked at Freddy as hard as he could. His foot caught the killer with a glancing blow on the thigh—and kept going. Jacob yelped in horror as he felt his foot sink into Freddy's leg as easily as if he was made out of warm butter.

Frantically he pulled backward, trying to extricate himself, but Freddy's flesh clung to him like glue.

A sharp, stinging sensation traveled up his leg. Jacob glanced downward and saw with a start that his oversized pants were smoking. A second later they burst into flames. Jacob yelled in fear as blue flames licked up toward his body. A blistering pain inflamed his leg and Jacob screamed, jerking and struggling and fighting to free himself from Freddy.

Freddy watched him writhe in the flames, his eyes alight with amusement. "Say when."

"Go fuck yourself!" Jacob gasped. The flames rose higher, then leaped upwards, enveloping him completely. Jacob screamed as the flames washed over him. He reached out with both hands, trying to push himself away from the killer.

"Ah, how sweet. You want to hold daddy's hand?" Krueger chuckled. He wrapped his fingers around Jacob's, squeezing hard. A blinding pain exploded in Jacob's fingertips, as though his very bones were trying to pierce his skin. Jacob saw to his horror that Freddy's silver knives were melting, fusing to his own fingers.

"Let go of me!"

But it was too late. Jacob wrenched his hand away from Freddy's, but the blades were bonded to his fingers. Jacob shook his hand around in a frenzy, but the knives stayed put. A wisp of smoke rolled off the end of one of the blades as the metal oxidized in the heat.

Freddy released Jacob and stepped backward, looking down in approval. The flames went out with a hiss, smoke rising from Jacob's charred skin. "You want me to hold up a mirror so you can see the back?"

Jacob staggered, reeling backward. He held up his shaking hand and stared down at it, his own face reflected back to him in five slices on the shiny blades. His mouth dropped open in shock. His face was hideously burnt, the flesh peeling and cracking away from his skull.

A second face came into view behind his own, reflected on the blades.

Krueger's face. Burnt and rotting. Just like his.

Like father, like son.

Jacob threw back his head and screamed...

And woke up.

In a single leap he was out of bed. He darted across the room, thumped into the door, and pressed himself up against it, shaking with revulsion. His hand flew up to his face and he stared down frantically at his fingers.

They were normal. No sign of any knives anywhere.

He tasted blood in his mouth and it took him a moment or two to realize he'd bitten through his own lip in his sleep. Bile rose in his throat and for a second he thought that he was going to throw up.

He laid his head on the cool metal of the door, and shortly the feeling passed. But his underlying fear held on, squeezing his heart and constricting his chest in an iron grip. After a moment he tentatively pressed a hand against his throat, where Freddy had scored him with his fingerknives.

When he pulled his hand away, there was blood on his fingers.

When the shaking in his body had subsided, Jacob wiped his hand on his hospital gown and stumbled back across to his narrow bed. He sprawled full length on it, waiting for his heart rate to return to normal. The floor beneath the bed was dirty and Jacob saw that even, in his holding cell the floor was paved with that same green linoleum with the white flecks.

Damn cheep-ass decorators.

The pillow was lumpy and hard under his head. Grunting, Jacob pounded on it to soften it up, then slid his hand underneath to turn it over.

His fingers touched something hard and metallic.

Jacob's face froze.

Very carefully, Jacob withdrew his hand from under the pillow, sat up, then got off the bed and backed away from it until his back touched the far wall. He slid down it and sat in the corner, as far away from the bed as possible.

He stared at it, his eyes wide.

In the room next to him, the phone started to ring.

ELEVEN

"Hello? Is there anybody there?"

Ella made her way down the corridor toward the dim glow of the red light. She was completely lost in the bowels of the burned-out MediLab and she was starting to panic. The light seemed to be a hell of a long way away, which worried her, but anything was better than stumbling around blindly in the darkness.

The red glow became brighter as she got closer to it, filling the corridor with a dull, sickly light. The air in the corridor was stale and chilly and the burned walls on either side of her glistened with condensation, turned an oily black by congealed soot. Ella shivered, folding her bare arms and hugging them tight to her chest to conserve heat. The air seemed to be getting warmer the closer she got to the red light, which led her to hope that she had found a way out of the place.

She reached the end of the corridor and paused in the doorway, her eyes anxiously scanning the room. The corridor opened out into a large store room with a single red bulb hanging down from the low ceiling. It illuminated a room scoured and blackened by the fire, filled with a confusing jumble of burned shapes and fallen beams. The skeletal remains of a dozen lab benches were fused to the floor and scattered debris covered every horizontal surface. Part of the ceiling had fallen in and pale moonlight spilled through a broken window on the opposite wall, glittering shards of glass scattered on the floor in front of it.

A movement caught Ella's attention and she froze, straining her eyes in the gloom.

There was somebody there.

The figure of a boy was hunched at one side of the room, half hidden in shadow. He was facing away from her, backlit by the moonlight, fixated on something she couldn't quite make out. Something in his manner made Ella pause, her cheery greeting dying away in her throat.

She watched him for a couple of seconds, unsure whether to approach him. He was probably just some kid from the party who had got lost like her, but still she was cautious.

The boy turned, sensing her presence. For a moment he stood stock still, regarding her unwaveringly, almost quivering with alertness. Ella noticed he was wearing some kind of robe, like a hospital gown. It was stained with what looked like black paint.

What was that, some kind of freaky fancy dress? Boy, had this kid mixed up his invites tonight.

The boy turned his attention away from her and busied himself behind the bench. He made no further acknowledgement of her presence. Ella heard the splash of running water.

As the silence grew longer, she crept into the room and stopped by the first bench, as close to him as she dared. "Hey," she said awkwardly.

The boy froze and glanced up at her, frowning as if he had already forgotten she was there. Going by his physical stature he looked no older than seventeen, but his expression gave away his more advanced age. He was wiry and compact, and had scruffy shoulder length hair that hung in loose dark ringlets around his face. From beneath it his eyes glittered blackly, regarding her with a ferocity that was anything but friendly.

Ella tried again. "Are you lost?"

The boy looked her over, his expression wary, almost feral. A wash of unearthly moonlight painted a bright mask over one side of his face. "You could say that," he said finally.

Ella smiled, relieved. "Me too. I didn't bring a light with me and it's kind of dark outside. I have no clue how I got here." Ella smiled and brushed her hair out of her face. "I think I must've taken a wrong turning somewhere. I'm such a putz."

To her surprise, the boy only stared at her blankly. "Door's over there. Use it."

Ella's smile faded. She folded her arms and tipped her head to one side, pouting a little. "I just told you I was lost. How am I supposed to get out of here without a light?"

Silence. Then water splashed as the boy busied himself in the sink. A muffled, thumping dance beat sounded somewhere in the distance.

Ella leaned back against the bench. "I'm asking you to help me."

Again the pause, the hard, almost angry stare. "Then don't."

"Fine." Ella got up and marched around to the other side of the bench. "Have it your way. I sure I'm perfectly capable of finding a flashlight in place like thi... Is that blood?"

She stared at the boy, who froze, his hands still submerged in the sink. A stray beam of moonlight lit up the water, making it glow a bright red. He pulled his hands out of the sink and quickly wiped them on his robe. "Nah. It's paint. I'm a decorator. Isn't that obvious?"

Ella shook her head, not sure whether to be fascinated or horrified. "That doesn't look like paint to me. It's all over you!" Ella moved closer, concern supplanting her fear. "What happened? Did you cut yourself on something?"

The boy's eyes unconsciously flicked to the window, then back to Ella. He seemed to shrink a little, as though coiling himself for action. "Maybe," he said, as though he was trying out a story on her.

"Let me see." Ella moved toward him, then stopped as the boy flinched away from her—not afraid exactly, just cautious.

"What?" she asked.

The boy's eyes tracked back to the window, then over to the door. "I'm fine. Just go."

"I *told* you. I can't. I'm lost. I have no idea how to get back to the party." Ella gestured toward the ceiling. "The lighting kind of sucks in here..."

"Party?" The boy stared at her as though she had just told him there was an air raid going on.

"Yeah, party. You know. Food. Drink. Dancing. Sweaty boys. That kind of thing." Ella decided to try a different track. "Look, I'm sorry I disturbed you. But I can't just leave you like this. You're hurt. Do you want me to call an ambulance? Or the police?" She reached into her pocket and pulled out her cellphone.

The boy reacted so quickly she didn't even see him move. One minute she was holding the cellphone, the next she was staring into

the sink at the small ring of bubbles that marked the phone's entry point into the water. "Hey!" She fished it out quickly. Water poured from its mouthpiece and dripped down onto the floor.

The boy turned away and began throwing things into the small duffel bag at his feet, moving with a fluid motion that made Ella think of a jungle animal. "It's not safe here," he muttered. "You should go."

"Go? Go where?" Ella was angry now. "This place is like a maze. Escher himself couldn't have done a better job."

"I told you. Door's over there." This time, he pointed. Ella strained her eyes in the red-tinged gloom and just about made out a darker rectangle to the side of the room.

A second door.

"Should get you back to your little party. Keep one hand on the wall. Don't take any turnings."

"I won't." Ella took a step toward the door, slipping her soaked cellphone into her pocket. The boy was facing away from her, rifling through the cupboard under the sink. Weird kid, she thought. But not bad looking. "Hey," she called back. "Do you have a name? Just so I know who to curse when I try to call a cab home and my phone blows bubbles at me."

There was the slightest pause. "Jacob."

"I'm Ella. It's been—interesting."

Jacob shrugged. "Likewise. We should do this again sometime."

"Okay. But you bring the chips and the dip."

"Suits me." The boy held her gaze for a moment and Ella felt a flash of something pass between them. She didn't know what it was, but it freaked the hell out of her. Her gaze slipped downward. His stained gown was open at the top and she could just make out the pale lines of a white scar running across the top of his chest.

One long line.

Two downward strokes.

Almost like the tops of two letters.

She felt the boy's eyes, and looked up to see that he was glaring at her, his expression dark. "Seen enough?"

"What happened to you?" was all she could manage.

"Ask Freddy. He's the one trying to kill me." The boy gave a short, humorless laugh, then slung his bag over his shoulder and started toward the door. "Don't dream. Or he'll get you too. I'm gonna try to stop him. Wish me luck."

"Freddy?" A faint bell rang in the back of Ella's mind. "Freddy who? And what do you mean, don't dream?"

But the boy was gone. The door banged shut behind him.

"Hey!" Ella ran forward and yanked the door open. She paused, peering anxiously into the pitch blackness on the other side. "Freddy who?" she shouted.

If the boy heard her, he didn't reply. The corridor was quiet save the far-off beat of the music, but she couldn't even hear footsteps.

It was as though he had just vanished into the night.

Ella started forward into the darkness, walking as quickly as she dared, one hand on the wall, her other thrust blindly out in front of her. After thirty seconds, a flashing light off to her left caught her attention. Ella hesitated, then struck out at a right angle toward the light. The music got louder the further she walked and in less than a minute her fingers brushed against the metal frame of a door.

She groped around, located the handle, and flung the door open.

Light flooded her senses and she squinted in pain, shielding her eyes with her hand. She was back in the main party room. The door opened out on to a metal catwalk that ringed the lab and below her the party was in full swing.

Almost beside herself with relief, Ella closed the door firmly then walked to the edge of the gantry and peered down at the packed masses of revelers. A techno-stomper by Static X was playing and the room was alive with people jumping, people dancing, people laughing.

Everyone looked like they were having a great time.

Ella's eyes scanned the crowd, but there was no sign of the boy. He had completely vanished. She searched for her friends, but she couldn't see a familiar face. Jen and Dimitri were probably off in some dark storeroom somewhere, making out, she guessed, and Nikki and Henry were nowhere in sight.

Ella quickly made her way down the steps to rejoin the crowd on the dancefloor. The packed room seemed uncomfortably hot and the music was almost painfully loud. Ella pushed her way through the packed masses, tired and not at all in the mood for all this revelry.

After a few steps a girl clad in thigh-high vinyl boots jostled her, shrieking with merriment. Ella grimaced and shoved her aside, wishing that she'd stayed home tonight. Someone's cigarette burned her leg. As she jerked away from it, she collided with a tall boy carrying two beer jugs. Beer sloshed down her front and the boy threw her a disgusted look before disappearing into the throng.

Okay. That did it. She was leaving. There was a payphone out the front of the school. She would call a taxi and be home in under half an hour. Ella thought longingly of her bed, then realized she should at least try to find the others and tell them she was leaving.

A couple more steps and she was out onto the makeshift dancefloor. The crowd was less densely packed here and Ella made her way quickly around the edge of the seething mass of bodies, on the lookout for her gang. A familiar face jumped out at her and she started forward in relief.

Then she stopped, her mouth hanging open.

Nikki and Henry were dancing together. Nikki's long dark hair flew around her as she twisted and shimmied, hands above her head, gyrating her hips to the pulse of the music and gazing deeply into Henry's eyes. Henry had one hand around her waist and the other on her shoulder, and from the grin on his face he was enjoying himself immensely. The pair of them seemed oblivious to everyone else.

Ella's eyebrows flew to the top of her head. She hadn't even known that those two liked each other in that way. She'd only been gone a short time...

The pair were obviously having fun, but as she watched her friends dance together, Ella felt resentment start to creep in. She would probably be the only one going home alone tonight. True, she was tired and cranky, but that wasn't the point. Everyone else seemed to be having the time of their lives, while she was the one who got arrested, and lost, and had to talk to weird boys covered in blood.

It was just typical of her life at that moment.

She turned her heated gaze back onto her friends, knowing that she should be happy for them, but unable to muster anything beyond a bleak depression. They were dancing closer now, their hips pressed together. She watched Nikki lean into Henry and gaze dreamily into his eyes, as if he was the hero of a romance novel.

It was so cute, it was almost sickening.

Ella knew that she should just leave them, but a perverse part of her wanted to share the story of how crappy her night had been. That was what friends were supposed to be for, after all. She hung back, composing her thoughts, then stepped resolutely onto the dancefloor.

Reaching the pair, she tapped Nikki on the shoulder. "Hey, girl," she said.

Nikki unwound her arms from around Henry's neck. "Hey," she said shyly. She gazed at Ella in concern, then leaned in closer and dropped her voice. "What are you doing?"

"Leaving." Ella shook her head. "You will not *believe* the evening I'm having. Tonight has been the full nine circles of hell."

Nikki looked at her weirdly. "But we've only just got here," she said.

"I know. Sorry." Ella tried to smile. "I'm not in the mood to cope with this. I guess I'm just tired."

"But—your dress. You spent hours getting ready."

"What, this old thing? It took me, like, five minutes to..." Ella looked down at herself and her voice tailed off into silence.

A great expanse of white material billowed out beneath her, flared out at the bottom like an old-fashioned ball gown. Lacy patterns traced their way down the garment, ending in a series of pleated ruffles more at home on her grandmother's curtains than on something Ella would willingly wear in public.

Her hands instinctively flew to her sides to touch the dress and she discovered she was wearing elbow-length silk gloves, just like her mom used to wear to weddings. She looked down at her feet and noticed she was wearing antique-looking satin slippers. A look of stunned bemusement crept slowly across her face.

She stood, frozen in confusion while the music blared around her. "Um, Nikki," she said, very carefully. "What am I wearing?"

"Your dress, silly." Nikki giggled.

Ella blinked. Nikki was suddenly wearing a big white dress too, an even more whacked-out ball gown. Her hair was up in a fancy French braid and she wore a pearl necklace around her throat. How had she changed so quickly? Had someone slipped drugs into Ella's drink?

Ella took a deep breath, then grimaced and tried again. Her lungs wouldn't expand properly. Was she having some kind of fit? She ran her hands up over her ribcage and got her answer.

She was wearing a corset!

Henry stepped forward, looking concerned. He was wearing a ridiculous black suit with tails and a starched white shirt. His usual punk-rock hairdo was smoothed down with a gallon of hair gel plastered across his scalp. "Are you all right?" he asked her.

Ella backed away, her brain whirling inside her skull. "I'm insane," she muttered. "That must be it. I've gone clinically insane." Her feverish gaze roved around the room. The entire crowd was dressed in the same crazy style, the leather and vinyl and denim replaced by a shimmering sea of satin and pristine pastel cotton. The candlelight picked out a scene that was more like an Elizabethan costume drama than a twenty-first century party. Young girls swung elegantly around their tuxedoed partners, their hair piled high, their cheeks rouged. The chatter of polite conversation filled the room, broken by the occasional girlish giggle. The DJ's booth was gone and in its place was a string quartet, the lead violinist plucking out an intricate melody that sounded suspiciously like an acoustic rendition of a Static X song.

Okay, that was it. She was losing it. What was it that woman at the police station had said about hallucinations?

"Would you like to sit down?" Nikki's eyes were wide with concern. "There's a bench right over there."

Ella looked. There was indeed a bench, right on the edge of the dancefloor. It was white and had gilded swans painted onto the back of it.

Ella swayed on her feet, then felt gentle hands guiding her off the dancefloor. Bewildered, she let herself be led to the bench and sat down awkwardly, mammoth folds of dress material bunching up on either side of her. The band started up again and Ella's attention was drawn magnetically back to the dancing figures of Nikki and Henry.

She watched them with a detached interest. Despite their weird costumes, they did look good together. Ella wondered why she hadn't thought of pairing them up together a long time ago. She watched as they twirled each other around, moving together in a gracefully synchronized dance. They looked like they had both spent years learning it, and Ella was impressed.

Talk about hidden depths. She hadn't known that Nikki could dance at all.

What a great evening! Nikki watched the room spin around her, smiling delightedly, her glossy black hair flying out like a dark raven's wing. Henry took her hand and spun her around twice more before pulling her back to him. He looked so handsome in his black tuxedo, with his gold pocket watch swinging from a chain. He took a step back and bowed to her, and Nikki curtsied in return. Then the pair of them launched into a crazy country dance number that nearly caused her to lose her shoes.

Nikki threw back her head and laughed. She was having so much fun! And to think that she'd nearly stayed at home this evening!

Nikki winked at Henry, swirling her skirts. The band kicked up into a higher tempo, and she grabbed Henry's hand and swung herself around him, skillfully avoiding the couples spinning and twirling around her. Henry pulled her in close at the end of her swing, twining his fingers with hers and drew her tightly into his body.

Her eyes locked with his. Nikki dropped her gaze coyly and giggled. He was such a doll! She wondered if he would hold hands with her when he walked her home tonight. Perhaps he would even kiss her on the cheek!

The tempo to the song sped up still further and Nikki paused a second to get her breath back before starting a new dance. The whalebone corset she was wearing was pressing on her lungs again, making it hard to breathe. She recomposed herself and hoisted her smile back up. She had to keep up appearances.

After three minutes, she was sweating in a very unladylike fashion. She couldn't seem to catch her breath. Nikki started panting, feeling a wave of dizziness as her body demanded oxygen that she couldn't give it. Her vision darkened momentarily and she reeled a little, then reached up to wipe her forehead, her smile fixed.

When was this song ever going to end?

She staggered to one side for a moment and glanced around, searching for an escape route, but as she did so an older gentleman caught her by the arm and twirled her back into the heart of things. She politely stepped around him, avoiding eye contact, but he held onto her arm and used her own momentum to spin her around until she was facing him.

She looked up at the man, a weak smile on her lips. He was in his mid-thirties, with piercing blue eyes, a high hairline and dirty blond hair that was graying slightly around the temples. He had tanned, freckled skin with just a hint of stubble and wore a gray frock-tailed coat with what looked like riding boots.

The only bold colors in his costume came from his undershirt, which was colored gaily in bold stripes of green and red.

Nikki politely curtsied to him, feeling strangely nervous. The man still hadn't let go of her hand and it was starting to make her feel uncomfortable. His grip was much firmer than she would have liked and his hand was cold and clammy. She smiled again, hoping that he would get the hint and let go, but he only gripped her more tightly.

She glanced around, but Henry was nowhere to be seen.

As she dithered, the stranger pulled her in close to him. "What's your name?" he asked. His breath was stale and stank of tobacco and rum.

Nikki pulled away from him slightly, her eyes were still scanning the room. "What's it to you?"

"Everything." The man grinned, revealing dirty yellow teeth.

"My name's Suzanna," lied Nikki. "Pleased to meet you." She shrugged, non-committal.

"Except it's not, is it?"

"Excuse me?"

The man smiled again, his gaze mocking. "Your name. It's not Suzanna."

"Course it is. How do you—"

The man rounded on her. "You're lying to me, Nikki. I hate it when people lie to me."

"I'm not lying—"

"Sure you're not." The man's voice dripped with sarcasm. His cold eyes locked with hers and Nikki felt a chill stab through her, like an icepick to the gut. His gaze seemed to pierce through to the back of her head and in a split second Nikki realized without a shadow of a doubt that *he knew*.

About everything. About her life. About her lies.

About *her*.

She didn't know how he knew, but he knew.

The man was still holding her hand. Nikki looked up at him, the smile frozen to her face. Behind her, the band launched into a polka number.

The man sniffed. "Truth is, Nikki, you're a little phony. Always have been, always will be. You can't face the fact that you're a boring little bitch with no life and no friends, and the only reason you're here is that you're too stupid to realize that nobody likes you."

All of this was delivered in such a pleasant tone of voice that it took Nikki a couple of seconds to catch up with what had just been said. For a moment, her face registered shock, then her expression slid through disbelief into anger. "Now hold on a moment!" she protested.

"Can it, bitch." The man grinned again, but this time there was no trace of humor in his voice. "You're nobody. You're nothing. You think these guys like you? Bullshit!" He leaned in closer, squeezing her hand tightly. "They pity you, that's all."

Nikki felt her face flush hotly. Despite herself, tears prickled behind her eyes. "They do like me," she whispered.

"What was that? Speak up, you little attention-junkie whore."

"I said—"

"Ah, forget it. Who the fuck cares? You could drop dead right here and nobody would give a damn. Except for the worms, of course, and they'd just be pissed 'cos they'd have to chew on you." The man pursed his lips and regarded her slyly. "You've got a lot of nerve showing up here, looking like that." He gestured down at her dress. "Whaddaya think this is, Halloween?"

Nikki dropped her head, cursing the tears that had started to flow. The man's words stung her soul. He was wrong. He didn't know...

She tried to pull her hand away, but he was holding it too tightly. "Let go," she said quietly. She tugged again. "I said *let go!*"

"Ah, give it up." The man grabbed her other hand and yanked Nikki around, spinning her away from him and then back again. She stumbled.

"Stop it!"

"No, *you* stop it, you dirty little bitch!" The man smiled cruelly, his gaze seeking hers like a wasp drawn to sugar. "Except you can't, can you? Tell a lie often enough, and..." He sneered and shook his head, looking her up and down. "You're just a joke. You might fool the others with your song and dance, but you can't fool me. You make me sick."

With a sob, Nikki broke free from the man's grip and lurched away from him. In a frenzy she ran around the edge of the dancefloor, searching for a way out. There was none. The crowd was packed too tight. She felt people's eyes on her and heard a ripple of conversation spread in her wake.

"What's *she* doing here?"

"What a tramp—look at her dress!"

"I didn't invite her. Did you?"

A spotlight suddenly stabbed down out of the darkness and pinned her, cowering, to the dancefloor. People stepped away from her expectantly, and a smattering of light applause rose from the rest of the room.

Nikki looked up timidly, her eyes red, her cheeks streaked with tears.

The man stood in the center of the room under a second spotlight, one hand outstretched toward her. He was wearing a top hat and in his other hand he held a ruby-topped cane.

He looked almost dapper, except for that awful grin.

Nikki cleared her throat in the resultant hush, her eyes flicking around the room like a trapped animal. Behind her, she heard the conductor tapping his stick on the music stand: one-two-three, one-two-three...

The band struck up, playing a waltz. Nikki's feet started moving of their own accord, kicking and tapping and spinning her back toward her partner while the audience applauded. Then she was back in the man's foul embrace and they were moving together, waltzing around the room. His fingers locked painfully tight around the bone of her wrist, grinding the bones together, while his other hand ran down her body and lingered on the curve of her hip. She felt his warm, damp breath on her cheek and shuddered in disgust, but found she was unable to pull away from him.

The man threw her into a quick spin and the crowd cheered.

As he pulled her back in, a sharp pain stabbed through Nikki's arm. She looked down. Blood was trickling out from beneath the bandages on her arm. As she watched, the one on her wrist slipped down to reveal a large, angry looking gash.

But this wasn't the fake wound she had spent half an hour painstakingly creating in her bedroom with her special makeup effects kit.

This wound was real.

Both bandages suddenly vanished in a flash of orange flame, scorching her skin and revealing horrific injuries beneath. Nikki gave a shriek of fright as the man reached up and grabbed hold of her other hand, squeezing tightly. Blood flowed from her engorged veins, pattering down and staining her white dress. Then he laughed and twirled her round again, his feet skidding on the bloody-slicked floor. "You wanna be a victim so bad? Try this."

Nikki flinched as an invisible blow struck her full in the face. The left side of her face started throbbing and she found that she couldn't see out of her left eye as it rapidly swelled shut. A second blow split

her lip and a third sent her reeling. Unseen hands grabbed her and threw her about, and fresh bruises in the shape of finger marks flared on the inside of her upper arms. Nikki struck out at them, flailing madly with her free hand.

"Stop it!"

The band sped up again and Nikki's feet obeyed, moving of their own accord, keeping pace with the music. Her heart pounded in her chest and her lungs heaved as she struggled to catch her breath. The man whirled her around again, roaring with laughter. Nikki began coughing, fighting to draw a breath from deep within her corset. It seemed to be getting tighter by the second, squeezing the air out of her lungs like a boa constrictor. Her feet flew back and forth, and smoke started to rise from beneath her skirts as her shoes began to smolder.

"Are we having fun yet?"

Nikki opened her mouth to reply, but the wind whipped the words out of her mouth. Her vision swam with blackness and she realized that she was about to pass out. The music drew to a climax, and the man spun her around so fast that she became a blur, then yanked her backward and caught her on his arm, leaning over her as though about to kiss her.

The band crashed a final note and they froze, a perfect silhouette in the spotlight.

The audience broke into rapturous applause.

Nikki stared up at the ceiling, wide-eyed. Something felt wrong inside her body. She gasped and her mouth suddenly flooded with blood. She spat, repulsed, but more flowed up her throat, as though she was somehow leaking from the inside. She rocked her head forward and looked down.

There were knives protruding from her chest.

The man had stabbed her right through the back.

He stared down at her as though she were an insect on a pin. "Hey kid! Don't let me keep you hanging around."

Abruptly, he pulled the knives out of her back, releasing her. Fire belched out of the wounds, spreading upwards to engulf her body. "Tell everyone in hell that Freddy says hi."

"Freddy?" Nikki's lips barely moved. Then she spun down, down, downward, falling toward the floor in slow motion as the world around her faded away.

And through the flames, she heard the man's voice.

Laughing at her.

TWELVE

A whirling red and blue light washed over the back of the MediLab as an ambulance and two fire trucks jockeyed for space on the weed-strewn lot. The main door to the building hung open and streams of revelers poured forth like columns of marching ants, dispersing as quickly as possible before the school officials got there. Uniformed firemen wove their way through the throngs, rolling up a big yellow fire hose and shouting at people to stand back.

Ella sat on a low, graffiti-covered wall just outside the complex, one arm around Henry, who was staring fixedly at the ambulance. There was a smudge of soot on his forehead and he was cradling his left hand, which was wrapped in a bandage. Jen and Dimitri sat a short distance from them, looking grim, too shell-shocked to even speak.

Nikki was dead.

A police car crunched up the gravel drive and pulled to a halt alongside them, weeds rattling against its grill. A tired-looking officer got out. Ella recognized him from the police station as being Officer Goodman. She squeezed Henry's shoulders, then got up and walked over to greet him. She was trembling with emotion and exhaustion, but made an attempt to be friendly. "So, they put you on night duty now?"

Officer Goodman nodded. "Sweethearts that they are." He glanced briefly at the assembled crowd, then watched as a covered gurney was slowly loaded into the back of the ambulance. "Jesus. What happened here?"

"She just—died," said Henry. His voice sounded small and tight. He looked up at them, his eyes haunted. "We were dancing and she just—one minute she was fine, and then..." He waved a hand vaguely.

"How did she die?"

Henry shook his head. "You wouldn't believe me if I told you."

"Try me."

Henry covered his mouth with his hand and blew through it, trying to gather his thoughts. "She caught fire." He gave a little giggle, then

choked back a sob. "But I didn't do it, I swear. I tried to put the flames out, but I couldn't..." He looked down at the bandage on his hand, fiddling with a loose end. "How could that even happen?"

Officer Goodman stared at him, a muscle twitching in his jaw. "You're sure she didn't brush against anything? A cigarette, maybe? These modern fabrics..."

"No. Nothing like that." Henry shook his head again, as though irritated by the question. He looked up at Officer Goodman, his eyes dull with exhaustion. "Can I go home now?"

"No. Sorry. We'll need to get a statement from you all."

A shout went up from one of the firemen and Officer Goodman waved sharply at them, then drew a hand across his throat. "Sit tight, kids. I have to go see to this. See you in five." Officer Goodman strode briskly toward the waiting fire truck.

Ella put a comforting hand on Henry's shoulder. He hung his head, tears shining in his brown eyes. "I tried to save her," he said simply.

"It wasn't your fault, sweetie. You did all you could."

"I know." Henry picked fitfully at the burn holes in his blue jeans. Then he looked over at Officer Goodman, who was talking animatedly to the fire chief, glancing over at him from time to time with a dark look on his face.

"He thinks I did it, doesn't he? He thinks I killed her."

"Nobody thinks that. There were witnesses..."

"You saw what happened, right?"

"I saw—something." Ella shifted uncomfortably. She rubbed her hands together, trying to warm up. The chill night breeze gusted through her thin party top and she sincerely wished she'd brought a jacket with her. "What did you see?"

Henry shrugged casually. "Well, I could've sworn that we were in some kind of Elizabethan costume drama, and you were in a ball dress, and I was dancing some kind of frilly old-person dance with Nikki, then next thing I know she's on fire." Henry cleared his throat, wiping at his eyes. "So tell me, sailor, which way's the loony bin?"

Ella scuffed a foot on the ground. "We could look it up on MapQuest together." She raised her eyes to his and held his gaze for a moment.

"You—you saw it too?"

"I saw it. I lived it. The freaking corset nearly killed me." Ella's eyes flashed in the night. "Henry, what in the name of sweet holy fuck just happened?"

"I don't know. But I don't think holy's got anything to do with it." Henry stared at her for a moment, then his eyes lit up and he snapped his fingers. "Freddy."

"Huh?"

"She said 'Freddy. Before she died. I was trying to put the flames out, and she just looked right through me and said his name. She sounded so scared..."

Ella felt goosebumps break out all over her body. "You sure?"

"Positive."

"Freddy, as in Matt's Freddy?" Jen walked over to join them.

"Dunno. That's all she said."

Ella stood up excitedly. "I met a boy upstairs tonight who was talking about Freddy too. He said that Freddy was trying to kill him."

"Well, I'm sure there are a lot of people called Freddy—"

"Bit of a coincidence, don't you think?"

"Well, let's break out the Uzis and go take this mad killer down." Dimitri stood up, his expression quizzical. "Dunno 'bout you, but I'm convinced."

Henry's eyes blazed with sudden fury. "You wanna help, pretty boy? Then how about you shut the fuck up? Nikki just died, in case you didn't notice." He glared at Dimitri. "But why would you notice a little thing like that? Unless there was a video link in that broom closet we found you both in, shorts round your ankles..."

"How 'bout both of you just shut the fuck up?" Jen glared at Henry, then turned back to Ella. "Listen. This could look really bad for me. Matt's still missing and I don't want the cops to come sniffing around. Where did you say you last saw that boy?"

"He was upstairs. But then he vanished. He could be anywhere." Ella shook her head helplessly. "And why would the cops come after you?"

"Would you know him if you saw him?"

"Probably. But—"

"Then how about we go find him, instead of standing around here bickering like a bunch of old women? Maybe he can give us some answers."

Jen swung round in a swirl of hair and started walking back toward the MediLab. After a moment Dimitri ran after her, throwing a black look back at Henry, who gave him the finger.

"Well that was real mature." Ella glared at Henry, but when she saw his expression, her face softened. "You gonna be okay?" she asked, in a gentler tone of voice.

Henry took a deep breath, then turned to face the dark shell of the gutted building. "Let's go find out," he said.

The inside of the MediLab seemed smaller now that it was empty. Ella led the others across the deserted dancefloor, shards of light from the disco glitter ball spinning silently over them. Together, they climbed up the metal stairwell onto the gantry and quickly located the door. Ella hesitated before walking through into the darkness, but Jen pulled a lighter out of her bag and cracked it open.

After a short walk they found themselves in the ruined main lab. Wind gusted through the broken window at the far end, and the red light gave the room an ominous atmosphere.

"So where's this boy, Sherlock?" asked Jen, glancing dubiously around at the wrecked room.

"He was here. But he left through that door."

"What? So why'd we come back up here?"

"I was hoping he'd come back. I followed him out the door, but he didn't come out the same place I did." Ella glanced around the devastated room. "I thought there might be some kind of turning in the corridor that I missed."

"It was just one corridor, girlie." Jen clicked off her lighter, saving the fuel. "Hey. Maybe he was a ghost. It's been a good night for it."

"You're all kinds of funny. But ghosts don't bleed." Henry pointed to the sink. Smudges of dark blood were still visible on the taps.

Dimitri peered over her shoulder and made a dismissive noise. "He ain't here. He probably took off with the other losers." He glanced at Henry pointedly, then waved a hand at the door. "Hey, there are two doors here. Which one should we pick?"

Henry shrugged. "Which one is your favorite door?"

"Oh—I dunno. Which one is your favorite finger?"

"Such wit." Henry slung his jacket over his shoulder and started heading back toward the first door. "Come on. Let's just go back out the way we came. If he's out there, we'll find him."

"Uh, guys?" Jen was staring at the floor, a weird look on her face. "I think this might've been a bad idea."

Ella looked down. As her eyes adjusted to the dim light, she saw a dark crack running the length of the room, bisecting the floor. Faint orange light was just visible on the other side. An ominous creaking sound filled the air, like the sound of a ship's timbers flexing in the breeze.

"Oh," she said. "That doesn't look goo—"

Then the floor fell in.

Jacob ducked out from behind a car in the parking lot of The Stray Cat and regarded the building warily. He had been there for well over twenty minutes and so far he hadn't seen anything to indicate he was being watched.

No security guards. No helicopters on the skyline.

And best of all, no cops.

The building in front of him was shabby and dimly lit, with colored lights in the window and tatty billboard posters on the door. Three Harley motorcycles were parked out in the weedy front lot, red flames painted on their gas tanks and a couple of burnt-out T-Birds lurked by the entrance. Hanging above them, a large, faded sign showed a silhouette of a buxom woman kneeling on all fours, the pink letters beneath it proclaiming "World's Most Beautiful Girls!"

Jacob gave a wry smile. So, the world's most beautiful girls had decided to come here to Springwood, to work the graveyard shift in

some trashy low-rent strip joint?

Yeah, that was likely.

After another couple of minutes of cautious surveillance, Jacob plucked up his courage, hoisted his stolen pants up a little higher around his waist and set off with big strides across the concrete toward the front door.

He only hoped that he looked more confident than he felt.

Inside was even darker, if that was possible. Jacob squinted around him in the gloom, getting used to the low light. A couple of fruit machines flashed and spun by the door and the mirrored wall behind the bar reflected its only patrons, three surly-looking bikers nursing root beers. Billiard balls clinked sedately as two strippers on their lunch break shared a cigarette and a laugh over the pool table. Up on the stage, a bored-looking young Asian girl in a bright pink bikini gyrated and spun half-heartedly around a brass pole, her eyes fixed firmly to the TV at the back of the room, which was tuned to some late-night Seventies martial arts flick.

Jacob slipped into one of the bright red, wipe-clean plastic booths at the side of the room, and played with the cocktail menu. He had no money to buy a drink. He tried not to make eye contact with the other patrons and did his best to ignore the girl up on stage beyond the occasional furtive glance. He hadn't seen a girl that naked in over five years and now was not the time to catch up.

He was just reaching into his pocket, to see if the previous owner of his jacket had left any money in the lining, when the door behind him swung open violently, rebounding off its springs with a loud *crump!* Alarmed, Jacob rose to his feet, his eyes darting around the room for a possible escape route. Then he sank back down in relief at the sight of Kane striding across the room toward him, dressed casually in black jeans and a gray polo sweatshirt, his long black hair swept up in a ponytail.

Kane threw himself into the seat opposite Jacob and studied the cocktail menu with great enthusiasm, then raised an arm and signaled the waitress.

"Dianne, the usual," he cried.

After a moment, all eyes turned away from him and back to the stage. This was not the kind of place where it did your health good to stare. Kane put both hands on the table and beamed at Jacob. "Glad you could make it, kiddo."

Jacob did not smile. Instead, he opened his jacket to reveal a gun. Kane froze, but Jacob merely pulled it out and slid it along the booth seat, under cover of the darkness. "Is this yours?" he asked, his voice tight with anger.

Kane looked down at the gun thoughtfully, then reached out to pick it up. He checked that the safety catch was on, then tucked it away safely inside his jacket. "Let me explain," he said.

"I don't wanna hear it." Jacob glanced up at the barmaid, making sure her back was still turned, then leaned forward, his eyes flashing in the darkness. "You set me up, you bastard."

"I did that, boy, but for good reason."

"I killed three more people tonight and it's *your fault!*" Jacob hissed. Across the room, one of the bikers glanced up sharply, then turned firmly away with a scrape of his chair.

Kane waved a hand impatiently. "Read the papers, kid. People die every day. There's always another sucker willing to die for a good cause. You have to look to the bigger picture."

"And that is?"

"Killing Freddy."

A muscle in Jacob's jaw twitched. "Keep talking," he said eventually.

Kane sat forward, his face alight with excitement. "You think I was assigned to your case at random? *Please*. I knew about Freddy from the beginning."

"You're shitting me."

"I'm serious. Before I came to Westin, I used to work up at the police station and I saw everything." Kane paused, watching the Asian girl's stage-bound gyrations with a faraway look on his face. "They swore me to secrecy, of course. When those teens started dying, I had to deal with their paperwork. There was so much paperwork—the shredder had a hard time dealing with it all."

"Your drink, sir." A pretty waitress slid a jug of beer in front of him.

"Thanks, Dianne. Keep the change. So anyway," Kane leaned forward, dropping his voice. "I saw what was happening, how the cops tried to cover the whole deal up. How they wiped out Krueger's records, blacked out the news files in the library, locked up any kid who started having the dreams." He leaned forward, his eyes sparkling. "I saw *everything*."

"So what's that got to do with me?"

"You saw him last night, right?"

There was only the slightest hesitation. "Right."

"Even though they gave you the Hypnocil, to stop your dreams?"

"Right. I figure he's found a way to get round the Hypnocil. It's freaking me the fuck out."

Kane nodded briskly, trying not to smile. "We have to move fast, then," he said. "Krueger is smart, but we can beat him."

"How?"

"Jacob my boy, I think you know how." Kane looked up at him, his eyes bright with curiosity. "How are you doing it?"

"Doing what?"

"Stopping everyone from dreaming."

Jacob was silent for a long moment. Then he stirred and reached up to rub his eyes. "You've read my files, right?"

"All eighteen boxes of them." Kane shook his head. "You're amazing. If we could just channel that power you have..."

"I'd be dead," said Jacob bluntly. "I'd have died of boredom while your guys wrote reports and prodded me with needles and filled in paperwork and got me guest spots on Oprah and CNN. Fuck that shit. I'm through with it all. It's no fun being Billy the Wonder Kid when no one gives you ice cream."

Kane nodded, raising his eyebrows encouragingly.

"It wasn't my fault," Jacob went on, sounding defensive. "I had to do it. Before they locked me up, fed me the Hypnocil, Freddy would come to me every day, boastin' and braggin' about how he's gonna kill everyone in the whole town and then there'll be nobody left but me and him. I couldn't stand it."

"So you decided to cut off his pathway into our world?"

Jacob nodded. "It's just one town, after all. It's taken me this long, but now I've finally got it cracked. It's like I'm seeing the town from space in my head and just—locking down on people's dreams with my mind." He waved his hands around to illustrate. "I have no idea how it really works, but once I'd figured it out I knew it was the only way to keep him contained."

"How long can you keep doing this?"

Jacob shrugged. "As long as I need to. At first it was hard, but now it's like breathing. I don't even know that I'm doing it."

"What if something happens to you?"

Jacob shrugged. "Long as I'm here, he can't be here too. That's all I want. He killed my dad. I owe it to him. If I prevent one more death, it'll be worth it. Right?"

"But now that Freddy's found a way round the Hypnocil..." Kane left his words dangling.

Jacob swallowed the bait. He looked up at Kane with genuine fear in his eyes. "I'm screwed, right?"

"Not necessarily. That's where I come in." Kane reached into his bag and tossed a box onto the table, inwardly rejoicing. The kid was so stupid...

Jacob picked up the bag. After a brief hesitation, he peered inside, then looked up at Kane with a question on his face.

"It's a Deathstone," said Kane. "Southern Mori tribes use them. It's supposed to capture the soul of a dead person and hold it in limbo, until it can be transferred into the body of a newborn. They believe their loved ones can be returned to them in this way."

"So what's that got to do with Freddy?"

Kane's gaze darkened. "Freddy is a soul confined to his own particular kind of limbo. He died violently and now he can't rest till he's avenged his own death." Kane shrugged. "Trouble is, no one person killed him. Over forty people were involved in the death of Freddy Krueger. The Mori have a name for an entity like him—a Tskabi, an angry spirit. These spirits will stop at nothing to wreak misery and pain on those who killed them, or on their families. That's why the kids started dying."

Kane took a reflective sip of his drink and gazed thoughtfully into the glass. "Of course, that could all be bullshit, but you never know. Hold on a moment." He rummaged in his jeans pocket, then stood up and tucked a five dollar bill into the pink bra of the Asian girl, who was making the rounds of the tables. She gave him a wide smile that did nothing to hide the distaste in her eyes, before heading toward the back room with a flounce and a wobble of stilettos, Piped music came on, a bass-heavy Rob Zombie song and the curtain swung closed.

Kane sat back in his seat, rubbing at his temples "So," he said, "Freddy killed all the children of the people who murdered him. But he's still here. He still can't rest. Since the cops intervened with their Hypnocil, he's had no outlet for all that rage. And with you stopping everyone's dreams, he's completely cut off from all his fun toys." He picked up his drink. "Nobody's dreaming. Unless, of course, he finds out a way to kill people in their *daydreams*." Kane gave a little laugh, then paused and looked at Jacob hard. "He couldn't do that, right?"

"Not that I know of." Jacob stared off into space for a moment, looking worried.

"So, in the meantime, he's directing all his attention onto you. That's a lot of dream energy you're holding back there. Perhaps he's drawing on that to get around the Hypnocil?"

Jacob sat back in his seat, his eyes flitting nervously around the room. "Interesting theory," he said.

Kane regarded Jacob coolly. "You know any different?" he asked.

"Maybe," said Jacob. "But go on."

Kane leaned across the table and took the box from Jacob. He pulled out the blood-colored Deathstone and buffed it on his sleeve. It shone red in the dim light, seeming to glow from within. "This little cutie's gonna help us. Both of us. If what I've read is right, we can use it to catch Freddy, then you can let the town dream again, take all that weight off your shoulders."

"And I do—what, exactly?"

"All you've got to do is summon him and then I'll do the rest. A little bit of hoocha-hoocha and his soul will be trapped in here, stripping him of his powers. And that will be that." Kane leaned

forward, smiling winningly. "Just think about it, Jacob. We could do away with Freddy for good."

"What's all this 'we' business?"

"Come on now boy, don't be like that. We're on the same team, you and I. We both want the same thing—Freddy gone. The town saved. Kids dreamin' without worrying about getting' liquidized in their beds. And it's all in your hands."

Jacob sat still for a long time. Then he rubbed a hand over his eyes. "So where do we start?" he asked.

Kane smiled. "That's my boy."

Four streets away, the back lot of the Springwood police station was almost empty.

Almost.

A large black van was parked up by the back wall, almost invisible in the darkness. Its licence plates were conspicuously missing and a curtain was hung over the front windscreen. From time to time it would rock slightly and if you listened very, very carefully, you could hear what sounded like a woman's voice coming from inside, yelling for her lawyer.

Then everything went quiet.

A short while later the back doors sprung open, spilling a wash of yellow light out into the night. A dark figure was thrown out of the back, spinning to the ground in a tangle of flailing limbs and swirling auburn hair. A briefcase followed next, its contents spilling out and littering the sidewalk with a shower of flying paper. The back door slammed and the van gunned off into the night.

Dr Sally Spencer raised herself up on one elbow, rubbing at her bruised wrists. "Well," she said to no one in particular, "*that* was entertaining."

THIRTEEN

Ella woke up in red-tinged darkness. She shifted on the ground, groaning. Her head throbbed with a sharp, stabbing pain and a soft moan escaped from her lips as she shifted her position. Everything hurt and her cheekbone ached from where her head had hit the ground.

She rolled over, struggling to focus in the gloom. Above her was a high metal ceiling, barely visible in the dim red light. A rusty tangle of copper pipes snaked their way across it, throwing long shadows across the walls. The room faded into darkness at the far end, the shadows seemingly impenetrable.

A frown knit Ella's brow. Where was this place?

Slowly, she rolled onto her side, wincing as her bruised cheekbone stabbed at her, then carefully levered herself up into a sitting position. The movement caused a fresh rush of black static to fill her head and she flung out a hand to support herself on the ground, feeling like she was going to throw up. The floor was sticky, and after a moment her dizziness passed and she drew her hands back into her lap, wiping them convulsively on her jeans.

Blood.

Her exploring fingers touched a cut on her forehead and there was a small pool of it on the floor where she had been lying. She wiped the worst of it off and looked around warily, then clambered to her feet. The throbbing in her head subsided slightly and she took a few deep breaths to clear her mind as she looked around, searching for signs of life. She seemed to be in some kind of underground lab, full of pipes and wrecked, burnt-out machinery. The walls were lined with blackened cages, and the air was uncomfortably warm.

There was no sign of the others.

Ella started walking, her footsteps ringing on the metal floor. She drew level with the first of the cages and peered inside, curious. A moment later she recoiled, her hand flying to her mouth.

The cage was full of the bodies of lab rats, their twisted remains blackened and flash-welded to the metal bars by the heat of the

blaze. Their fur was burnt off, vaporized by the extreme temperatures, and dried blood gleamed dully on their charred, naked bodies. The rats stared at her with hollow black eyes, teeth bared as if to challenge a death they could not escape.

"Jeez..." Ella's gaze flitted fearfully over the nearby cages. Now that her eyes were getting used to the low light, she could see that they were also occupied, dead black shapes hunched obscenely on the floor.

Sickened, she moved on.

A movement in one of the larger cages caught her eye. It was followed by a muffled scraping. Ella hesitated, curiosity warring with her revulsion. Cautiously, she knelt down in front of the cage and peered in.

In the dim light, she could see the back half of a small, shaggy-haired puppy protruding from a pile of wood shavings. Its tail wagged enthusiastically as it dug around, snuffling quietly.

"Oh!" Ella's heart swelled, and she leaned forward and quickly opened the latch, a soft smile on her face. She reached into the cage and ran her hand over the little creature's rump, stroking its fur. The puppy yipped at her touch, then started to back out, kicking itself free of the shavings.

Ella leaned in further, reaching out to help it. "You poor little scrap! Did they leave you here all by yourself? That's no fun for a pretty little doggy like—holy crap!"

Ella stared, her mouth open in horror. The puppy looked up at her, panting happily. But there was something very wrong. The creature's entire front half was burned to crisp. Its ears were gone, and the flesh had melted off one side of its face, bone gleaming whitely through the matted mess of its fur. Skin hung down in shredded strands along its flank, revealing bloody internal organs and a tiny white rib cage.

Ella jumped back in horror as the dead puppy scampered toward her with a clatter of claws, its blackened tongue lolling happily out of its mouth. It didn't seem to be in any kind of pain. Tiny teeth met in a death's head grin and the creature danced in a joyous little circle, begging to be picked up.

Ella stared at it. "That," she said, "is so wrong."

A loud *bang* behind her made her start. The echoes bounced around the room, metallic overtones hanging in the air. Ella glanced around in fear to see a door open on the other side of the room, muted red light spilling out of it and drenching the air. Beneath her, the puppy yapped excitedly then took off across the room like a rocket, a blur of flying legs and burnt fur.

Ella stood up awkwardly, dusting her hands off. She shaded her eyes and peered through the door. Four shapes were visible, silhouetted against the light.

Four young girls, playing in the ashes of the room.

Two of them held a skipping rope between them while a third jumped over it, her dress held up primly to avoid dirtying it on the cinders. A fourth girl stood behind them, patiently awaiting her turn. They were all barefoot and wore old-fashioned cotton dresses and bonnets, their sun-bleached hair flying around them as they skipped and jumped, chattering cheerily amongst themselves.

Ella watched as the puppy scampered up to the fourth girl and gave a flying jump upwards, launching itself into her arms. She caught it expertly and swung it round, laughing delightedly as it started yipping and licking her face with wet swipes of its tongue. She didn't seem in the slightest bit bothered by the way it looked.

Plucking up her courage, Ella walked through the door and approached them.

As she drew near, the fourth girl turned and looked up at her. She had brown hair tied up in bunches with red ribbon. Her laughter died away, and she cradled the puppy protectively against her chest as she stared at Ella, an accusing look in her eyes.

Then she turned her back and made her way over to the others. Taking her place between them, she gave the puppy to the third girl, who took it with a cry of delight and kissed it on the nose. She began to skip, easily keeping pace with the wide swings of the rope. The girls began chanting a playground ditty, their voices thin and insubstantial in the dusty atmosphere.

"One, two, Freddy's coming for you..."

"Three, four, better lock your door..."

The hairs stood up on the back on Ella's neck. A feeling of foreboding filled her. She watched the little girls as they continued their game, their chanting growing in volume.

"Five, six, grab a crucifix..."

A light wind rose in the room. A few sheets of newspaper fluttered past them, vanishing into the shadows. Ella glanced behind her nervously.

"Seven, eight, better stay up late..."

The puppy's head swiveled toward Ella. In an instant its expression changed, the matted fur on its back rising, its bloodshot eyes narrowing. It growled at her, low in its throat.

"Nine, ten, never sleep again..."

The rope hit the ground, throwing up a cloud of ash. A flash of red light burst through the cloud, revealing the four figures of the girls in its smoky, translucent interior. They stopped skipping and stared back at Ella, unmoving, the rope hanging limply between them.

Ella gasped. The girl's faces were skeletal inside their creamy white bonnets, their eye sockets empty. Blood soaked through their dresses in a rich flood, and their bare bone feet clicked on the metal floor. An instant later, the light faded and the girl's bodies crumbled to the floor, disintegrating in a puff of hot ash. The wind ruffled through the piles of empty clothes left behind, then all was still again.

Amid the cinders, the puppy howled.

"Wanna play?"

Ella jumped and spun round, her heart almost exploding inside her chest. A tall, wiry man stood directly behind her, arms folded, leaning casually against a pillar as though waiting for a date. His face was in deep shadow, partially concealed by the battered hat he wore.

The janitor, perhaps?

Ella clutched her chest in relief. "Jeez! You scared me! You shouldn't just creep up on a gal like..." Her voice died away in her throat and she stared down at the man's hand. He was wearing a soiled gardening glove with knives fixed to it, like long, silver claws.

Her eyes flew to the guy's face and she recoiled in shock. His features were burned and twisted, and his skin was charred to a crisp, like a pizza that had been left in the oven too long.

Ella's mouth fell open. "This has to be a dream," she told herself. "I fell and hit my head. I have to wake up..."

The man smiled, revealing rotting, needle-like teeth. "You're not dreaming, Ella. You can't wake up. This is real."

Ella shook her head, still staring at the man's face. "No way!" She pointed a shaking finger. "Look at you, at all those burns. They aren't real, they can't be. If they were you'd be dead!"

"Whoever said I was alive?" The man glowered at her, his yellow eyes flashing. "You're not paying *attention*!"

With that, he slammed his knife-glove back against a nearby pillar. Metal squealed and a large chunk of the pillar fell away.

Ella's jaw dropped.

The man lifted his hand again. Ella jumped back, but he merely raised a charred eyebrow at her. "Check this out," he said, his voice a guttural whisper. He held up his other hand out in front of his face and winked at Ella. Then he slashed downward with his blades.

His arm fell to the ground with a wet *thunk*, severed at the elbow.

The man grinned, waving the stump at Ella. Greenish black blood spurted. "Pretty cool, huh?"

Ella stared at the burnt madman who had just cut his own arm off. Her mouth opened and closed a couple of times, but no sound came out.

"Look, I can write my name!" His voice was singsong. He turned and directed the spurting blood onto the rusted iron floor, sweeping his arm up and down to form the letters "FK". Then he looked up and his expression darkened. "Hey! Where do you think you're going?"

"Away!" Ella threw the word over her shoulder as she sprinted for the stairs at the end of the room. She reached the first step and started climbing, then gave a yell as her feet suddenly left the ground.

Slowly, dreamily, she started floating upwards.

Ella's feet pedaled in empty air for a couple of seconds, then she flung out a hand and grabbed onto the stair rail. She pulled with all her might, fighting against the unseen force that was dragging her off her feet. Then she yelped as the rail suddenly started to heat up, flexing and writhing slowly under her hands. Ella looked down and

found that she was holding onto the tail of a giant silver serpent. Its head hissed at her, glaring through slitted purple eyes.

Ella goggled.

In the background, the madman laughed. "Come to daddy!"

With a jerk, Ella's grip was pulled free. Kicking and flailing, she sailed backward through the air, yelling in fear. She had always dreamed of flying, but not like this. She floated back across the room, and hung suspended in front of him. The air around her hummed, crackling with invisible energy.

Then the energy cut out, dropping her six feet to the ground. She landed with a bruising clang on the metal floor.

The man smirked. "Oops."

Ella rolled over, wincing at the pain that flared in her ribs. "Who the hell are you?"

"Who d'you want me to be?"

The name came to Ella's mind, unbidden. "You're Freddy, aren't you?"

He clapped his hands slowly, applauding her. "Freddy *Krueger*, to be precise. Now..." He dropped his hands to his side and breathed deeply, looking Ella over with relish as though she were a prime rib steak at a restaurant. "Let's get down to business."

With a flash, he reached down and grabbed Ella by the hair. He hauled her to her feet, easily swaying aside as she lashed out at him, then held her tightly against his chest, cupping her chin with his free hand, getting her in a headlock. Ella slammed her elbow backward, connecting sharply with his chest, but the madman didn't so much as flinch. Freddy buried his nose in Ella's hair and breathed in deeply. "Ah—I just love the smell of fear in the morning! Really gets the old blood a-pumping, know what I mean?"

"My friends are down here," Ella said, struggling to break free. "One word from me, they'll kick your ass."

"I'd like to see them try," growled Freddy. "Look up."

Despite herself, Ella glanced suspiciously upwards. Her head reeled.

Henry, Jen and Dimitri were suspended from the ceiling above her, high up in the rafters. They were bound with thick rusted chains

and gagged with silver duct tape. They hung there limply, unmoving. Ella couldn't tell if they were alive or dead.

"You bastard! Let them go!" she cried, punctuating each word with a jab of her elbow into Krueger's rotting ribs.

"No," Freddy said. He grinned down at her, savoring her fear, then shifted his grip and made a sharp gesture with his free hand. Beside them, part of the wall fell away in a tumble of bricks to reveal a roaring furnace. Six-foot flames shot out, licking hungrily against the edges of the hole.

Ella flinched, turning her head away from the sudden blast of heat, then turned back and squinted warily into the flames. Something was moving inside the furnace. She stared at it for a moment, then gasped in recognition.

It was Matt.

Or rather, it was a white light in the shape of Matt. It was moving, trying to swim through the flames toward her, as if the fire were nothing but choppy water. Its mouth was open in a soundless scream of anguish.

The word "ghost" slammed into Ella's head, but she quickly banished it. She didn't believe in such things.

Ella's voice was a whisper. "What is that?"

"Ah, c'mon. Don't you recognize your little playpal?"

"Matt—oh my God..."

Inside the furnace, the figure reached out toward her imploringly. She caught the sound of its voice, tinny and faraway, like a faint signal coming through a TV set tuned to static. "Ella? Ella! Please! You gotta help m—"

Freddy waved his hand impatiently. A barred metal grate slammed down, sealing off the furnace. Then he released his hold on Ella's hair and gave her a hard shove, sending her spinning to the floor. Ella rolled over and stared up at Freddy with hate in her eyes. "You killed him?"

Freddy shrugged a shoulder, looking modest. "'Killed' is such a strong word."

"You bastard!" Ella jumped to her feet and launched herself at him. The air buzzed and Freddy vanished, leaving Ella to collide

headfirst with the pillar behind him. She reeled away, clutching her forehead. Disembodied laughter echoed in her ear.

"Round and round and round we go, I'm too fast, you're too..." A hand smacked her on the back of the head, bouncing her face off the pillar. "Fucking stupid! Ahaha, ahahahahahHAH!"

Ella wiped the blood out of her eyes and gritted her teeth. She backed up a couple of steps, glaring round her at the empty air. "What do you want?" she said, her voice a low growl that matched the killer's own.

Freddy blinked back into existence in a hum of superheated air, like an ugly, decaying tooth fairy. "I've got a little job for you." He eyed the blood on her face, all traces of humor gone. "I need you to kill for me."

"Me?" Ella backed away, placing a good distance between the two of them. "Why do you need me? You're the one with the—whatever the hell those things are." Ella gestured weakly toward Freddy's knife-glove.

"Hey. *I'm* the one asking the questions, bitch," Freddy spat. He flexed his fingerknives ominously, clacking the joints in his steel-plated gloves, then made a sharp gesture toward the ceiling.

Above them, chains rattled in the gloom. There was a muffled yelp and a second later Dimitri plummeted downward in a cloud of ash, stopping a bare three feet above the ground, spinning on the end of a long chain. As the dust settled, he unwrapped his hands from around his head and stared fearfully up at them. He was battered and bruised, but alive.

"Dimitri," breathed Ella. She gazed down at him, her heart in her mouth. Even wrapped in chains and covered in soot, he was still gorgeous.

"*Dimitri*," mocked Freddy. "Yeah, right. Why don't you tell Dimitri exactly why you're about to get him killed? Ten words or less, please, I haven't got all day."

"Don't you dare!" Ella ran forward and made a grab for him, but Freddy gave a contemptuous flick of his wrist, hooting with mirth, sending Dimitri hurtling back up into the air, out of reach. Ella

jumped for him, then whirled and glared at Freddy. "Damn you! Let him go!"

"Hmm, lemme see." Freddy pressed the tip of a fingerknife to his lips, as though considering his options. "How 'bout 'No?'"

He rounded on Ella, his eyes flashing. "Now, listen close. There's a boy I need dead. Kill him for me and I'll let your pathetic little friends go free. Refuse, and..." Freddy jerked his head toward the wall. The grate fell away, revealing the furnace. Dimitri started to float toward the open grate, struggling mutely as he glided through the air toward the flames.

"No!" Ella tried to grab at Dimitri, but she couldn't reach him. She could feel the heat from the furnace on the side of her face. Dimitri gave a muffled cry of terror.

Freddy leaned back against the wall, idly inspecting his fingerknives. "Take your time."

"What the hell's wrong with you?" cried Ella. "I can't kill someone!"

Freddy *tsked* under his breath. "Wrong answer."

He blinked toward the furnace and the flames shot up higher. A moment later, Dimitri sailed past him and disappeared feet first into the fire.

"Nooooo!" Ella ran toward the furnace and stared in, horrified. She could just see Dimitri kicking and struggling inside, flames licking around him. His tape bandage burned off and he began shrieking, fighting to free himself. Ella darted forward then stopped, shielding her face, driven back by the intense heat.

A long, terrible moment later, Dimitri's cries stopped. A ringing silence fell over the room, broken only by the crackle and pop of the flames.

"The boy's name is Jacob," said Freddy calmly. "Do you want me to write that down for you?"

Ella turned to face Freddy, her blue eyes blazing with rage. "You killed Dimitri!"

Freddy feigned shock. "Really? I musta missed that one." Then his smile faded, and he struck out with an ungloved hand, sending Ella reeling face-first to the floor. Before she could right herself, he strode

forward and bent over, grabbing her ankles and yanking her backward. She yelled and kicked out at him, catching him a glancing blow on the side of the head, but Freddy just laughed and grabbed her forearm, spinning her around onto her back. He knelt over her and sliced down with his fingerknives, slashing open her top, then raked his blades over her exposed skin. Ella cried out in pain and bucked beneath him, trying to throw him off, but he was far too heavy. He slashed at her again and again, laughing delightedly.

Summoning up the last of her strength, Ella braced herself on the floor and twisted her whole body beneath him, throwing the crazed killer off balance. Freddy pitched sideways, and Ella shoved at him again, then rolled out from under him and stumbled to her feet with a shout of triumph. She stood glaring down at him as he knelt on the floor in front of her, her hair wild, blood dripping down her top.

Then the pain hit her and she clutched at her stomach, then pulled her bloodied hands away, staring down at herself. The word "JACOB" had been sliced crudely into the skin of her belly, outlined in one-inch high letters of torn flesh.

Freddy got to his feet, giggling to himself. "Think you'll remember now?"

"I'm gonna kill you!"

Freddy laughed, tipping his battered hat. "Been there, done that. Gimme something original." In a flash he reached out, quick as a snake and grabbed her by the throat. "This boy—I need him outta the picture. And quick. How you do it is up to you." He tightened his grip and Ella began to choke. "Help me, or die. Your call."

"Why?" Ella coughed, tearing at the hand around her throat. "Why me?"

"Because," Freddy smiled an evil smile and tapped the side of his nose, "you're a good little girl. You'll do as you're told. The others—they lack the imagination." He glanced up at the rafters, where Henry and Jen hung, imprisoned, and grunted. "This little shit's been bugging the crap out of me for far too long. He needs to die. He's stopping their dreams. He's stopping *me*, dammit." Freddy's ugly features contorted into a rictus of hate. "*No one* fucks with Freddy and gets to live."

Ella pulled his rotting fingers back from her throat, just enough to breathe. A memory slammed into her head. Now that her shock at Dimitri's death had subsided a little, she finally registered the name carved into her belly.

Jacob.

The boy she'd met at the party.

The boy who'd said that Freddy was trying to kill him.

Ella felt cold and hollow inside. Dimitri was dead. "Why don't you kill him yourself?" she said hoarsely.

"I can't. He knows me. He's always ready." Freddy reached out a glinting steel talon and ran the tip idly down Ella's jawline. "But you—you can get through to him. He won't suspect a thing."

"But I can't."

Freddy pulled an expression of disapproval, then glanced up and nodded his head.

"No!"

Too late. Chains rattled, and Henry dropped down from the ceiling with a yelp, spinning on the end of his chain. Freddy cocked an eyebrow at the dangling boy, and his lips drew back into a sneer. "You got ten seconds. Ten... Nine..."

Henry made a frantic muffled sound, hanging upside down, as he started to float slowly toward the furnace. He'd seen what had happened to Dimitri. He jerked around in the air, desperately trying to pull his hands free of the chains that bound him.

"You let him go!" Ella pulled helplessly at Freddy's hand round her throat, then kicked out at him. He swayed backward, easily avoiding her wild blows, then shoved her to the ground with such force that she flew back a good ten feet before hitting the metal floor. Her head cracked against a rusted iron pipe, and stars danced in front of her eyes.

"Eight... Seven..."

"Okay, fine!" Ella lifted her head, coughing, dazed. "I'll do it!"

"You're lying, Ella. Six... Five..."

"I'm not lying! I'll do it! I promise!"

"Ah, enough already. I'm bored with this shit." Freddy yawned and waved his knife glove.

The air buzzed and Henry shot toward the fire.

FOURTEEN

"Let him go!" Ella's voice rang out above the roar of flames. She watched helplessly as Henry kicked and struggled, clinging on to the edge of the furnace with one hand. At the very last minute, he managed to wrench one hand free of the chains that bound him and grab onto the edge. The rest of his body streamed out horizontally, half inside the roaring fire pit, his feet just yards away from the flames.

Freddy laughed. "Oooh, he's a quick one, ain't he? But I'll wager he can't hold on much longer."

Ella's tearful eyes were fixed on Henry. Smoke was starting to rise from his hand and she could smell the awful stench of burning flesh. He gazed back at her mutely, his eyes wide with pain and fear.

She swung round to face Freddy. "Just tell me what I have to do," she whispered.

"Attagirl!" Freddy banged his hands together. "Now listen close. You've got one day to find this little shit and do away with him. Any longer than that, and..." Freddy lashed out with his fingerknives, and the side of the furnace caved in.

Henry disappeared inside the furnace with a howl.

"Henry!" Ella ran forward in panic. But even as she did so, the light of the fire dimmed and went out, as though it had never been there in the first place. She reached the wall and jumped upward, catching hold of the broken bricks that lined the lip of the furnace. Then she pulled herself up in one quick motion and stared frantically inside.

The fire had gone. The bricks weren't even warm. Henry lay on a pile of cinders in the middle of the pit, unmoving.

Ella pulled herself the rest of the way up and jumped down inside the darkened furnace. Then she ran over to Henry and shook him frantically.

After a long moment, he groaned and raised his head. "Am I dead?" he asked.

Ella hugged him, relieved beyond mere relief. "Not as far as I can tell," she said.

A sudden sixth sense made her look up. Freddy's face was outlined against the darkness outside the furnace, suspended in mid-air.

"One day," he said, wagging his finger.

Then he tipped his hat and waved a hand. Flames sprung up all around them.

Ella started to burn...

And woke up with a gasp, thrashing around in the darkness in an attempt to put out the roaring flames that enveloped her in a white-hot blaze of light.

After a long, panicky moment, her senses came flooding back to her and she realized that there was no pain. Panting wildly, she looked around her.

Darkness. A moonlit sports field. A cricket chirping.

It had just been a dream.

Relief swept through her in a cool flood. Her heart was pounding in her chest, but she was okay. She had never been more relieved about anything in her life.

She blinked in the semi-darkness and wrinkled her nose. She could still smell the stench of burning human flesh. That had been some dream. It seemed so real.

She licked her lips, wondering at what point she had fallen asleep.

She felt the tickling scratch of long grass beneath her and realized she must have somehow dozed off outside Jen's party. She yawned deeply. The moon above her was very bright. It must have been shining into her eyes as she slept, her brain somehow translating it into that whole crazy furnace scenario.

Ella rolled her head to one side, trying to get her bearings and came nose to nose with the burned, charred corpse of Dimitri, lying beside her on the grass.

Thirty seconds later, Ella ran out of breath and stopped running. She collapsed against a nearby tree, wheezing, her blood thundering

in her ears. When she could breathe again, she peered fearfully out from behind the tree, her eyes fixed on the still, dark form of the corpse lying on the school lawn.

The body of Dimitri.

Ella covered her hand with her mouth, unable to tear her eyes away from the grisly sight. Then she screamed and nearly jumped out of her skin as a cold hand fell on her shoulder. A second voice screamed and she whirled to find Henry standing behind her. Jen stood two paces behind him, white as a sheet.

Henry swallowed, staring at Ella. "Three words: what the fuck?"

Ella shook her head mutely, unable to speak.

He was clutching his hand. Ella saw that it was badly burned, just like in her dream.

Together, they turned and stared back toward Dimitri, too shell-shocked to speak.

"That wasn't a dream, was it?" asked Henry. His voice was so soft Ella could barely hear it.

"I have no idea." Ella felt shivers rise through her as she turned to face him. "But I think I know someone who might."

Five minutes later, Dr Sally Spencer hung up her cellphone, cursing to herself. Then she hauled on the wheel of her rental car, bringing it off the road in a graceful curve, finishing up in the parking bay on the side of the highway. She killed the engine and stared fixedly through the windshield, trying to process the conversation she'd just had. Her head was still throbbing and her split lip wouldn't stop bleeding. She reached for a tissue and pressed it against the side of her mouth, wincing.

After the day she had just had, this was just too much.

A bluebottle rattled against the glass, trapped inside the car. Automatically, Dr Spencer reached out to wind the window down and let the creature out. It soared up into the air with a buzz of wings, and Sally watched it go wistfully. In the ensuing silence, she

could hear the swish of cars on the freeway up ahead of her, heading out of town.

A minute later she swore and thumped the wheel. She had been so looking forward to getting out of this freaky, crazy place.

With a sigh, she restarted the engine. This kid had better be telling her the truth, or she was outta here.

"Would you quit pacing?"

"Sorry." Ella gave a crooked half-smile and walked across Henry's bedroom to perch on the edge of his bed. The coverlet was blue with brightly colored Transformers and Zoids on it, and the mattress sank down further than she expected beneath her, nearly depositing her on the floor. She scooted back on it, redistributing her weight closer to the center. "Jeez, who bought you this bed? Moses?"

"It is a little old, I'll admit." Henry stood with his back to the window, cradling his burned hand, which was wrapped inexpertly in a giant swathe of white bandages. They had gone straight upstairs upon their arrival back at Henry's house, after making sure the police had arrived to deal with Dimitri's body. They had split once the ambulance had arrived, despite Jen's protestations.

That was one phone call I never thought I'd have to make, reflected Ella. Images of Dimitri still filled her mind. She couldn't even begin to imagine how Jen was feeling and a big part of her didn't want to know. She felt unreal, as though this wasn't happening. Two of her friends had died in one night and now her mind had shut down refusing to deal with the reality of what she had just seen.

"So what are you going to do?" Henry asked, his usual good humor lost. He looked pale and drawn, and Ella's heart went out to him. "If that was real—that boy the Freddy guy mentioned—he wanted you to kill him. Right?"

Jen turned away from the window. She had been standing there ever since they had arrived, refusing to sit down or accept any of their sympathy. "We should go to the police." Her voice sounded distant.

"And say what, exactly? Some madman with knives for fingers told us to kill some kid we've never met, or he'll come after us in our dreams?" Henry snorted. "Forgive me for being Mr Doom-and-Gloom, but something tells me they'll put you on the short bus to the funny farm. You'll never see daylight again. One body could've been an accident. Two? They'll be straight on your tail. I'm surprised they haven't sent a SWAT van to pick us up already."

Jen made a distressed sound and turned back to the window, staring blindly out.

"Dimitri..." Ella felt her eyes brimming with tears at the thought of him. She knew she was in shock, but she was so tired and worn out that she didn't care. She went up to her and put a hand on her shoulder. "I'm so sorry, Jen."

"Wasn't your fault. You didn't do it." Jen's voice was cold.

But Ella wasn't so sure. "Do you think that he killed Nikki too?"

Henry sat down heavily on the bed next to Ella. "I don't know what to think. Maybe. Possibly. Who the fuck knows? We don't even know if he was real. He could've been some kind of whacko hallucination. Somebody coulda slipped something into our drinks at the party, made us think that..." Henry's eyes widened. "Maybe we killed them?"

"Don't say that. That's crazy." Ella drew her knees up into a cross-legged position on the ancient bed, her eyes flitting between them nervously. "Isn't it?"

"Hope so, honey." Henry rubbed his eyes with his good hand. "And why would we kill our own friends? It doesn't make any sense."

"It doesn't have to," Jen said darkly. "The cops don't care about that." She glanced at her watch. "Dammit, where has that psycho-woman got to?"

"The psychiatrist?" Henry shrugged. "It is kinda late at night. Maybe we should tell her to come over in the morning, instead?"

"By the morning we could be dead. We've gotta tell someone about this now, just in case..." Ella left the rest of the sentence hanging. "I just got a feeling that I could trust her. There's no way we can tell our parents about this. They'd just flip out and call the cops. And hey, if

all this does turn out to be in our minds, I'm sure she could get us a room with a view and maid service up at Westin Hills."

Henry shrugged. "I still say we should keep this to ourselves. If the word gets out..."

"It won't. Trust me." Henry put his hand on Ella's knee comfortingly. She looked up at him and they shared a sad smile. After a moment, Ella's smile faded slightly. Henry hadn't moved his hand from her knee. She glanced down at his lips, then back up into his eyes. A shiver went through her and she swallowed.

A bang on the door made them both jump. Ella leapt to her feet and ran over to the door. She threw it open to reveal a grumpy, haggard-looking little man—presumably Henry's father—standing behind the tall and graceful form of Dr Sally Spencer. Her lip was split and one of her eyes was blackened. "Hi!" she said brightly, holding up a box. "I brought cookies. Would one of you mind please telling me what the hell is going on?"

An hour later, Henry cracked open his sixth diet soda in a row, sipping contemplatively as he watched Ella and Dr Spencer talk. Sally sat on a broken wicker chair, a look of deep contemplation on her face. Her expression was grim and she looked exhausted in her rumpled business suit. Ella was kneeling on the ground in front of her, engrossed in reading the single, charred sheet of paper. Jen still stood by the window, clutching her cold soda as if her life depended on it. She was very pale, still wearing her miniskirt and party clothes. Henry wondered whether he should say something to her, try to comfort her, but his own loss was still fresh in his mind.

He'd so badly wanted to protect Nikki.

Finally, Ella looked up. "Is this a joke?" she asked.

Dr Spencer sat forward. "It's no joke. This kid is real. I met him. I read his case files. There were more, but..." She waved her hand helplessly at the scrap of paper. "This is all I could salvage from the crash site. I went back there, but the cops cleaned the rest away."

Henry plunged himself down next to Ella. "And you're talking about?"

Dr Spencer took a deep breath and threw him a tight smile. "I was in a car crash, couple days ago. A bad one. We were called out here two days ago by the sheriff. He thought that the town had been hit by some kind of crazy mind-altering virus."

"That's weird."

"Tell me about it. He said that crime rates had gone through the roof and that he some kind of brain infection might be the cause. I told him that no such thing existed, but he insisted we come on down anyway."

"Sorry. Who's we?" asked Ella.

Dr Spencer's expression became a little stiffer. "I bought my partner down here with me. His name was Mitchell. He specialized in virology, along with psychiatry, like me. We tested a bunch of people, but we couldn't find any evidence of a virus, or anything wrong with them at all. A little sleep deprived, that's all. The sheriff said he wanted me to write him a report anyway, so he could be justified in quarantining the town to reduce the spread of the infection. I told him there was no infection, that these people were perfectly normal."

"Normal, around here? That's a joke."

"You're telling me. But anything could've caused the crime wave—a factory closing, gang activity. I checked the papers but found nothing. I was as stumped as he was. But you can't quarantine a whole town without these huge reports and official evidence from the government. There'd be an outcry." She shook her head, combing her fingers through her tangled hair. "So he got very angry, told me I was a waste of time and threw me out, the bastard. But before he did," she held up a finger, "we met Jacob."

All three of them looked up at the sound of his name.

Sally picked up a pen and tapped it against her teeth. "He was being held up at Westin Hills, Juvenile Detention ward. He was a long-term detainee who went nuts a couple days back and butchered his ward mates. No motive, no previous history of violence. So we tested him. The Sheriff thought he might have been affected by this

"virus" too, but we found nothing. Not so much as cold. He was just a normal teenage boy, scared out of his mind."

"No such thing as a normal teenage boy," said Jen distantly. Ella looked over at her. Some of the color had come back to her cheeks, but she still looked very pale. "What?" she said defensively. "Like I was going to let that one go?"

Dr Spencer picked up her soda up and took a reflective sip. "Anyway. The sheriff was treating this kid like he was the key to the whole case. I was almost afraid to disappoint him."

"So how did you find out all this other stuff about him?"

"Totally by accident. Before I left, I went to find the powder room, but I made a wrong turning and ended up in the filing room. There was nobody around, so I snuck a quick peak at Jacob's records. They scared the hell out of me. I managed to run off a copy of them in thirty seconds flat and got the hell out of the building." She glanced out of the window, her gaze haunted. "I still don't know how they found out."

Ella swallowed, willing her voice not to tremble. "Where is Jacob now?" she asked.

"Gone." Dr Spencer pulled a slip of paper out of her jacket pocket and handed it to Ella. It was a cutting carefully torn out of the local newspaper, a bold headline stating "Boy Missing Under Mysterious Circumstances."

Ella studied it. The picture that accompanied it was black and white, and clearly several years old, but it was definitely Jacob. She read the article carefully, then handed it over to Henry. "Doesn't say anything here about him killing his buddies."

"Course not. You think the sheriff would want us to know there's a psychic killer on the loose, because his guys screwed up?"

Ella held up the charred piece of paper. "So this stuff's real?"

"I don't know." Dr Spencer drew in a deep breath, looking at the ground. "What I do know is that I spent four hours getting yelled at and threatened by a bunch of government thugs after I left the police station. They said they'd kill me and my family if I so much as breathed a word about what I'd read in that case file. Mitchell died in

the crash-burned to death. Now I find out your friends are dead under similar circumstances, I'm wondering if there's a connection."

"What, like the government people killed Nikki and Dimitri?" Henry shook his head. "No way. I was there, man. It was this burnt guy with knives for fingers. I saw him with my own eyes. But try telling that to the cops."

Dr Spencer stiffened. "Say that again," she said very carefully.

"What, about the burnt guy? Yeah, he was pretty gross. He looked like some kind of freaky pile-up victim, and he had a hat, and a stupid stripy sweater, and he wore this—"

"Glove with knives fixed to it," finished Dr Spencer. The other three looked at her worriedly.

"You've seen him too?" asked Ella in a small voice.

"I saw—something." Dr Spencer looked at each of their pale teenage faces in turn. "Before the crash. I must have dozed off in the car, and I had a nightmare about this guy, and when I woke up, Mitchell was dead. Burnt to a crisp, right there in the driving seat." Dr Spencer's eyes were tired and her voice was drained of emotion. "The guy said his name was Freddy Krueger. I've been over it a hundred times in my head. I still don't know what happened to him. Maybe it was the government, trying to kill us both and keep that case file secret? They could've drugged me and done the same to you." She tipped back on her creaking chair. "That's the best theory I could come up with."

"But then how come we both dreamed of this Krueger guy?" Henry got to his feet. "Screw that. I'm not buying any of this crap. The government's out to get us, just to keep this snotty little kid a secret? Bullshit." He marched over to his wardrobe and flung it open, then pulled out his jacket. "I'm going to find this kid, get some answers."

"Henry, perhaps we shouldn't get mixed up in all of this."

"But we *are* mixed up!" Henry swung, round to face Ella, his eyes blazing. Ella had never seen him so angry. "I lost two of my best friends tonight, Ella, in case you hadn't noticed. And Matt's still missing. If anything's happened to him..."

"So what are you gonna do, march up to the sheriff's office and demand to know what's going on with this top-secret case?"

"Maybe." Henry pulled his jacket on, but his movements had lost some of their intensity. "So what do you suggest, little Miss Perfect?"

"First, I suggest you cool off. Second..." Ella's eyes lit up. "Do you still have that CB radio?"

"This is hardly the time to be listening to aircraft control signals."

Ella shook her head irritably. "You can pick up cop car transmissions, right?"

"Right."

"So, I'm assuming the cops are out looking for this guy, if he's killed people. Why don't we have a listen-in?"

Jacob sat back in his hard plastic booth seat at The Stray Cat and picked at his fingernails, as he waited for Kane to get back from the restroom. The tips of his fingers were still stained a rust color and tiny flakes of dried blood still clung to his nails, like week-old nail polish. He scratched at it irritably, trying to process some of what Kane had told him.

Kane knew. Jacob had always known that, or at least suspected it on some level. Still, he couldn't shake the nagging feeling that there was something amiss, that Kane wasn't telling him all that he knew.

Still, it was a good plan—of sorts.

And besides, if everything Kane had told him was true, then for the first time in his life, he had something he'd never had before.

Hope.

The door behind him banged open and Jacob glanced up expectantly, but it wasn't Kane. One of the off-duty stripper girls emerged from the hallway and walked across to his table, smiling enticingly. She stood over him, her almost absurdly large breasts cupped in a shiny, gold tasseled bra and practically thrust into his face. A steel belly-chain corded her waist, and her pretty, delicate face was caked in heavy makeup and marred by stress and too many late nights. She couldn't have been older than eighteen.

Jacob leaned back in his seat and folded his arms. "I got no money," he said flatly.

The girl chewed her gum for a moment, then raised an overplucked eyebrow. "I know," she said, her voice betraying a lilting Southern accent. "You've been sat there for an hour chewing the ice from that water jug. You're a little young to be ogling the talent, aren't you?"

"I'm twenty-one," Jacob lied.

"Sure. How 'bout I take a little look at your ID, sweetheart?"

Jacob made a big show of patting his pockets. "Shoot, y'know what? I left it in the Lamborghini. Hold on one..." He looked up and froze, staring at the girl.

"One what?" The girl chewed on her gum.

"Uh..." Jacob blinked, then rubbed his eyes and squinted up at her.

His horrified gaze tracked over the girl's pale white skull and down to the bare bones of her neck, where a heavy silver necklace hung from her exposed vertebra. Her teeth bore smudges of bright red lipstick and there was an empty black hole where her nose should be. Behind her, three skeletons wearing black vinyl panties and thigh-high PVC boots spun and clicked their way around the poles, flies buzzing around them like a cloud of black dry ice.

"Well?" the skeletal stripper leaned forward and put both hands on the table—*click-click*—treating Jacob to a close-up view of her yellowish silicone implants, hanging loosely down in her empty gold bra. Beneath them, her rib-cage glistened wetly like a freshly-stripped carcass, maggots writhing and tumbling out of her torso's cavity and scattering down onto the table, plopping into the half-empty water pitcher.

Jacob shrank back. "I have to go now," he said quietly.

"Why?" Kane asked.

"Huh?" Jacob blinked and looked up. Kane was standing over him, looking down at him strangely. The girl was gone.

Jacob reached up and rubbed at his eyes, making blue circles dance behind his eyelids. "I think I need some sleep," he muttered.

"You and me both, kiddo," said Kane. "Now. Here's the plan—"

"Police! Everybody freeze!"

Jacob hit the deck a fraction of a second after Kane. As one, they dived under the table. With the clarity that comes with complete

exhaustion, Jacob saw one of the bikers very slowly and deliberately slip a cellphone back into his pocket. He raised his empty root beer glass toward Jacob in a mocking salute, then turned his back on them once again.

Jacob looked up to see Kane watching him expectantly.

"What?" whispered Jacob.

Kane responded with a jerk of his head toward the two police officers, framed in the open doorway. Then he raised both eyebrows, as if in punctuation.

Jacob swallowed. Then he turned back to the door, breathing hard, weighing up the odds. The cops hadn't seen them yet. But it would only be a matter of seconds before they did. Then it would be back to Westin for him and off to the county jail for Kane for helping him to escape.

That was one scenario. But he couldn't let that happen.

Not after everything he'd been through.

As the cops stepped into the room, Jacob squeezed his eyes tight shut, feeling a rush of blood inside his head. He concentrated, shutting out the sounds around him and focusing hard. He felt something stir inside him, almost like a presence, nova white and streaming out in all directions. He focused further, zeroing in on the police officers.

Then he opened his eyes and released his hold on the cop's dreams.

There was a burst of blinding light.

The bigger cop went down first, falling to the ground in a clatter of glass and metal as he upended a nearby table. The second cop turned toward Jacob, mouth open in a "O" of surprise. He took two faltering steps forward, reaching back for his gun holster, then suddenly dropped to the floor, clutching his head and staring in horror as ghostly images pranced and mutated in front of him. He shrieked in terror as a headless gym teacher appeared, hands reaching out for him, then fell backward into a giant spectral doughnut. He lay on the floor, quivering in terror, hit full in the face by an entire month's worth of dreams.

He didn't notice the dark figures of Kane and Jacob slip quietly past him and make a run for the door.

"Quite a talent you got there, my boy," said Kane, as the pair of them scurried for the back door. The bikers stood up hurriedly to let them pass and Jacob made sure he stepped heavily on the foot of cellphone Guy, who howled in pain.

Kane chuckled, then turned to Jacob. "I've got us a hotel room five blocks from here. We'll be safe there."

They had nearly reached the door when a black shape emerged from the shadows, the hulking, scarred, six foot six form of the strip joint's security guard. A white badge pinned to his lapel announced him as Gus.

"Where you boys going?" Gus asked, his voice heavy with menace.

"Home," replied Kane smoothly. "Stand aside. Quickly, please."

Gus glanced back at the police officers, still lying on the floor clutching at their heads. They were still conscious, but didn't seem to be going anywhere fast. "You do that?" he asked.

"No, somebody poisoned their doughnuts," snapped Jacob.

Gus smiled. "S'funny," he announced. Then his face settled back into a scowl. He held up his hands and spoke loudly as though reading from a giant cue card. "I'm going to have to ask you boys to —"

"Oh, I don't have time for this," said Kane. "Jacob?"

"Gimme a minute!" Jacob protested. He shook his head like a dog and gazed at the security guard through blurry eyes. It always took a lot out of him to use his dream powers. He needed time to recharge, to refocus and gather his wits about him.

The whir of a police siren sounded from outside, frighteningly loud. "We don't have a minute," said Kane, his voice surprisingly calm. He reached into his bag and drew out the gun, aiming it at the guard.

Behind him, the barmaid screamed.

"I'll ask you again. Move."

To his credit, the security guard didn't flinch. Instead, he folded his arms and glowered down at Kane. He had obviously heard that line a dozen times before. "An' i'll say again. No."

Kane turned to Jacob. "Cover your ears." He clicked back the hammer, and, before Jacob could stop him, fired two rounds into the guard's leg. The man dropped to the ground with a bellow of pain and surprise, clutching at his torn thigh. Kane stepped over him and pushed his way through the door. He turned back to Jacob. "You coming?" he asked.

Jacob stared at the felled guard, then ran through the door after Kane.

"Turn left here. I mean right. No, your other right. Which is left. Sorry."

"Can you make up your mind?" Dr Spencer glared at Henry as they bumped up the highway in Henry's car, a beaten-up red Buick. It was so extensively patched and hammered out and rebuilt that Sally wondered if there was anything left of the old car underneath. She struggled with the stick shift, grimacing as the gearbox made a crunching sound. "Does it always make that noise?"

"Only when it's switched on." Henry carefully turned a dial on the CB radio with one hand, scanning for signals. A babble of voices came out of the speakers. "Flight cruise control set at eighty-five-point-three degrees—*kkkkkkkrkk*—traffic heading eastbound from Exit Five—*kkkrrrrrrrrrr*—disturbance on Highland and Main, all cars back to base station..."

"That sounds like cops to me." Henry squeezed his shoulders back through the car and sat down on the worn vinyl of the back seat, next to Jen. "Now we just gotta listen."

"And drive," said Dr Spencer. "Where is this MediLab place anyway?"

"Behind the school," said Ella, from the passenger seat. She now wore a long, black sweater over her party top, borrowed from Henry, and her blonde hair was scraped back into a rough ponytail. She looked tired, but determined. "But I'm thinking he'll be long gone. Jacob, I mean."

"It's good a place as any to start our search," said Sally. "This CB thing is like finding a needle in a haystack full of junkies."

"Remind me again why we need to find this brat?" Jen said. She looked a little better now and had a compact mirror out to carefully touch up her makeup. Beside her, Henry watched in fascination.

"Jacob is the key to this whole mess," said Sally simply. She turned the wheel, glided the car into the central lane and accelerated. She frowned, then yanked the gear shift upwards. The car lurched and bumped a couple of times, bouncing them up and down. "We find him, we get some answers. I find out who killed Mitchell, you find out who killed your friends."

"And what if he doesn't have the answers?"

Sally shrugged. "The cops are going crazy trying to find this boy. He's wanted for murder, and, well, you saw his case files. But I don't think he murdered those people. Just a hunch, but I'd say that this Freddy guy is involved. We catch him, save this kid and stop any more people from dying."

"Sounds good to me," said Henry. "Just one problem."

"What?"

"We've got a flat."

"Shit." Dr Spencer downshifted. "Thought there was something wrong with this hunk of junk."

"Don't hit the brake—ah, crap," said Henry, as the car shuddered and stalled. Sally quickly heaved on the wheel, guiding the car over onto the roadside. It rolled to a halt in a spray of water beside a muddy ditch. The engine fell silent, then the lights died.

As one, three faces turned and stared at Henry accusingly.

"What?" he said. "It's not my fault. I haven't used this car in a month."

"Well, guess what, Percepto-Boy? You're changing the tire."

Henry grumbled, but he opened the back door and scrambled out onto the roadside. "Okay, fine, but you're helping me. I've only got one hand." He held up his bandaged hand to remind her.

"If it means ten less minutes in the car with you bunch of freaks, I'm happy to help," said Jen. "Come on. Let's just get this little farce over with."

As the two of them fussed in the trunk, chattering and bickering, Dr Spencer turned in her chair and studied Ella. The girl was sitting hunched forward, nervously chewing on a fingernail. Poor thing, thought Sally. She feels responsible for all of this.

"You okay?" she asked kindly.

Ella turned and looked at her, her eyes blank. "I'll be fine," she said, in a tone of voice that said she was anything but.

Sally put a comforting hand on her shoulder. "We'll get this guy, don't worry."

"That's just the thing," said Ella. "I'm not so sure that I want to find him. People are dead. They were murdered and we don't know who killed them. It's all just so unreal. I feel like this isn't really happening to me, that I'll wake up in a minute and everything will be fine." She turned to Sally and gave her a small, sad smile. "But it's not fine, is it? Nikki and Dimitri are really, really dead. I just can't..." She swallowed and looked down. "Perhaps we should just leave all this to the cops."

Dr Spencer shook her head. "Whatever's happening here, the cops are in on it. They kicked the shit outta me, remember? They don't want anyone near this case. If we want answers, then we're better off by ourselves."

Ella rubbed a hand over her eyes. "No. This Krueger guy—he told me I had one day to find Jacob and kill him, or he'd kill us all."

Sally looked horrified. "You're kidding! Why?"

"Who the fuck knows? Doesn't matter now. I don't know if he was real, or whether I was hallucinating, but when I woke up, Dimitri was dead. And I don't know how it happened."

"Dimitri was your friend?" said Sally.

Ella felt her throat close up. "Sort of," she admitted. "But I didn't know him real well. He was Jen's boyfriend."

"Oh." Dr Sally Spencer gazed thoughtfully out of the front windshield. "I'm sorry. I didn't realize. She didn't seem that upset."

Ella rubbed her face wearily. "I guess she's still in shock. It'll probably hit her soon enough. Give her a decent night's sleep and she'll be mainlining Ben and Jerry's till it comes out of her ears."

"I guess." Sally rubbed her chilly arms, watching Jen through the windshield. She was leaning on the bumper of the car, idly brushing her hair as she watched Henry battle with the jack.

Sally tilted her head, frowning slightly. There was nothing in the girl's body language to say that she was upset, but she knew that different people took these things in different ways. "Those two go out for long?" she asked, curious.

"Couple years," said Ella distantly. She really didn't want to be talking about this right now. She still couldn't believe that Dimitri was dead.

She turned in her seat and glared at Jen, outlined in the glare of the car's headlights and felt tears of resentment start to well in her eyes. What was her deal? If Dimitri had been *her* boyfriend, she would be sobbing her eyes out by now.

But Jen was dry-eyed, standing there as though she were on her way to some party, rather than on her way to catch whoever killed the love of her life.

What was wrong with the girl?

Outside, Henry dragged the spare tire from the trunk and hauled it over to the front of the car, holding it awkwardly between his good hand and his bandaged wrist. He dropped it, then threw a tire iron down next to it with a clang. "Jack," he said, holding out his hand.

"No, Jenny," said Jen, putting away her hairbrush.

Henry rolled his eyes "I mean, pass me the jack. What are you, stupid?"

"I'm not the one driving a car that should've been scrapped back in the pre-colonial days," snapped Jen. But she passed him the jack anyway.

As she bent down, she caught sight of herself in the side mirror and gave a little gasp of dismay. Whipping out her makeup bag, she pulled out a powder puff and a little pot of concealer and started reapplying it to her face. After a moment she stopped, feeling Henry's eyes on her. "What?" she said.

"Nothing," said Henry. He continued to stare.

"You got a problem?" asked Jen. "'Cos there are clinics for that, you know."

"It's just..." Henry waved a vague hand. "The makeup all the time. What's with that?"

Jen paused with her blusher brush halfway to her cheek. "What, I can't look good jus 'cos it's past midnight? *Please*. Just 'cos you guys are content to look like homeless skeezes doesn't mean I have to follow the trend."

"But who's gonna see you out here?"

"No one worthwhile, that's for sure. My boyfriend is dead," said Jen, with considerable relish. A flicker of amusement came into her eyes. "Hey, maybe Matt'll show up at some point in the evening. Then my day really will be complete."

Henry was quiet for a moment, deep in thought. "You like him, don't you?" he said finally.

"Who, Matt? Not especially."

"No, I mean you *like* him. Don't you?" said Henry, raising his eyebrows for extra emphasis.

"Am I sleeping with him, do you mean?" Jen's gaze was piercing.

"Oh, I don't mean..."

"You want to think I am? Feel free. Think what you like." Jen put away her concealer. "Just make sure you cash a little reality check every once in a while, 'cos no one likes a know-it-all. Least of all me."

"Hey, I was only asking."

"Then don't," snapped Jen. "You think you're so clever? Write to the *Readers Digest*. They have a special page for people like you."

Abruptly, Henry turned away and started jacking up the car.

Jen stared hotly at the back of his head, feeling a small knot of resentment start to grow in her chest. One thing she hated more than anything else was people making assumptions about her.

It was all so unfair when they didn't know the truth.

Nobody knew the truth.

She settled back onto the hood of the car with a petulant sigh, making the suspension creek alarmingly and watched Henry as he

worked, entertaining a very satisfying fantasy involving Henry, a chair, a bandsaw and a very large roll of gaffer tape.

Boys are so stupid. They should be rounded up and clubbed to death, all of 'em.

Five minutes passed. Henry was still down in the mud, wrestling with the nuts that held the hubcap in place. All things mechanical were a mystery to him, but he wasn't about to admit that in front of the girls. After a further few minutes of hard work he was sweating, and coated up to his elbows in mud and wheel grime. He scratched his head thoughtfully with his bandaged hand, leaving a streak of black oil across his forehead, wishing that he hadn't started this.

He glanced up, through the side window, where Ella was chattering animatedly to Dr Spencer. Maybe she could help him, if he asked her nicely? Jen was doing a fat lot of good by messing with her makeup.

Girls are so stupid.

As he crouched down in the mud, a shadow fell over him, but he was too engrossed to look up. "Hey Jen, could you hand me that tire iron?" he asked offhandedly.

A moment passed. The wind gusted through the trees, making a sound like distant rainfall. A twig from a nearby bush scratched along the side of the car.

Screeeeeeeeeeeeee...

"Jen?" said Henry.

Behind him, Jen silently picked up the heavy metal tire iron and stepped toward him, her face utterly expressionless. She looked down at Henry narrowed, as he bent over the wheel and her eyes a spark of red light flaring in their depths.

Then she raised the tire iron high in the air, ready to bring it down on the back of Henry's unsuspecting head.

FIFTEEN

Crouched by the side of the road, Henry tugged futilely on his wrench, trying to loosen the wheel nut. It was rusted in place and wouldn't budge, even with all his weight on the end of the wrench. Breathing out, he shifted his grip and gave a second tug. This time it spun free, popping off and pinging across the front of the car before plopping down into the mud.

Swearing, Henry leaned over to look for it.

Clang!

Henry nearly jumped out of his skin. He stared at Jen, who was struggling to pull the tire iron out of the large dent she had just made in the side of the car.

Right where his head had been.

He looked at her wide-eyed and uncomprehending. "What the hell are you—hey!" He threw himself flat in the mud as Jen took a second wild swing at him, the sharp, hooked end of the tire iron whirring over his head at high speed. He lay there for a moment, frozen in shock, but was forced to roll quickly to one side as Jen took a third swipe at him, sending dirty water spraying up into the air, splattering her clothes with mud.

Recovering quickly, he scrambled to his feet and danced back from the car as she brought the iron back up, ready to swing at him again. Her hair was wild and she had a look of manic glee on her face. "Jen! What's wrong with you?" he yelled. "Are you trying to kill me?"

If Jen heard him, she didn't reply. She raised the iron again, her gaze fixed unwaveringly on the top of his head. Her eyes were hard and cold, like those of an automaton.

There was a loud clunk, then a frantic banging sound from the car. Ella and Dr Spencer beat on the car windows, their eyes fixed on Jen. Ella waved frantically and pointed at the locks on the top of the door. Then her eyes widened and she gestured frantically behind Henry, screaming, "Look out!"

Henry jumped to the side again, narrowly missing cerebral lacerations as Jen swung the iron at him a fourth time.

That did it. He made a quick grab for the iron while Jen was still off balance, but she swung around with surprising speed and dealt him a glancing blow on the temple with her free fist. Henry gave a yell of pain and kicked out at her reflexively, sending her sprawling into the mud. Without missing a beat, Jen rolled over and scrambled to her feet again. She brought the iron up after her and stalked toward Henry, who backed away, clutching at his injured hand. "What the hell's got into you?" he shouted. "Stop it! Right now!"

Jen lifted the iron again and gazed at Henry. "I told her, the stupid little bitch," she said, her voice indistinct, almost dreamy. "She's got twelve hours left to kill him. She's dawdling. I *hate* dawdlers. You're next."

"Twelve hours? I don't know what you're talking about." Henry held up his hands to ward her off.

Just then, a red Ford Toyota pickup truck crested the top of the hill and rattled down the road toward them, its lights almost painfully bright after the dark of the night. Henry waved his hands at it frantically, but it didn't even slow down. As it passed them, it ran through a deep puddle of water beside their car, and a curtain of ice-cold mud gushed upwards, splattering against the side of the car and soaking the two of them to the bone. The Toyota disappeared into the distance with a blare of its horn, as if in amusement.

Henry backed away from Jen, who was dripping with water. She stood as though frozen, the tire iron raised.

Then she blinked and coughed once, twice. Her eyes focused on Henry and her brow creased in confusion.

Slowly, she started to lower the iron.

Henry grabbed her in a flying tackle, knocking her to the ground. He wrenched the iron from her grasp and sat astride her, pinning her arms to her sides. "I've got her! I've got her!" he yelled.

There was a double click from above them as the door locks suddenly disengaged. Ella and Dr Spencer spilled out of the car and rushed around to the front, where Jen lay in the mud, in the glare of the headlights, Henry sitting astride her. "Are you all right?" Ella asked breathlessly.

Jen suddenly seemed to return to her normal perspective. "What the? Of course I'm not all right. Do I look all right?"

"She didn't mean you, she meant me, crazy lady!" shouted Henry. "You just tried to kill me!"

"What? I did no such thing!" Jen kicked out in the mud. "I'm soaked! What the hell are you doing? Get off me, you freak!"

Ella took a step back as Jen's flailing legs kicked up a spray of muddy water. "Jen, you just attacked him with that metal car tool! Have you lost your mind?"

"Of course I attacked him. He was going to kill Henry!"

"Who?"

"Krueger. Didn't you see him? He was here!"

Dr Spencer stared at Jen. "Talk about delayed shock," she said, sounding doubtful.

"That's your diagnosis, is it?" asked Jen coldly. "Screw that. I saw him. Creepy guy, knives for fingers, yes?" She spat blood into the ditch. "Write that one up in your little text book."

Sally felt a wave of déjà vu go through her and shivered. The world had obviously gone mad, and was taking her with it. She didn't want to be here, in the mud, with these frightened and possibly crazy teenagers. She hoped sincerely that she would wake up any minute in her nice warm bed at home, hundreds of miles away from these insane people and everything would be okay again.

But this was no dream. And if Ella's theory was to be believed, there would be no dreams for her while she stayed in this town.

"Hey. What's wrong with your face?" asked Ella suddenly.

Everyone looked at Jen. In the harsh light of the car's headlights, it looked like one side of her face was bruised and swollen.

Jen's hand flew upwards, then she suddenly came back to life, kicking and struggling. "I said get off me!" she yelled at Henry.

Henry glanced at Ella, who nodded her head slightly. He jumped up, freeing Jen, who lunged into a sitting position, covering her face with one hand. "Everyone get away from me!" she snapped. "Get back in the car. You: fix that fucking tire, all right? We gotta get going before Krueger gets back."

"Jen, what is it?" Ella tried to peer closer.

"I said get away from me," Jen growled.

Ignoring her, Ella reached up and took hold of Jen's hand. Jen held it firmly in place, staring at her defiantly. Then, after a moment, the angry light faded from her eyes and tiredness flooded in.

Slowly, she lowered her hand.

Ella stared in horror. The left side of Jen's face was covered with faded bruises in all shades of purple and yellow. The area beneath her eye was discolored with patches of light and shade.

"Jen, where did all this come from? Henry never touched you."

"She's right. I hit like a girl," admitted Henry. "What happened to you?"

Jen sighed, the sound seeming to come from the pit of her soul. "Dimitri happened to me, that's what," she said tiredly.

"Dimitri?" I don't understand."

Jen lowered her eyes to the mud. "I guess I really do pick 'em," she said with a shaky attempt at joviality. She looked up sharply at Ella. "You had a crush on him, didn't you? Dimitri, I mean."

"Me? No, of course not! Why would you think that?" Ella gave a small laugh that faded into silence. "That's crazy," she said defensively, uncomfortably aware of Henry's eyes on her.

"It don't matter now. He's dead," said Jen. "But I just wanted you to know that he wasn't all that."

She reached for her fallen purse and pulled it back onto her lap. "Dimitri was a coward," she said. "He lied to everyone, including me. But you go out with someone long enough, you find out who they really are." She looked up at Ella, her eyes haunted and waved a hand at the bruising on her face. "You think I got this from walking into a door? Please!" She shook her head ruefully. "Guys like him don't care who they lie to. I hear his last girlfriend had to get a restraining order. I don't know why I stayed with him as long as I did."

"Jen, I don't know what you're talking about, said Ella. But in the back of her mind, a horrible light was dawning. She shut it out frantically, unwilling to believe what Jen was trying to tell her.

It couldn't be true.

Not Dimitri.

Jen shifted in the mud, trying to wipe it off her hands and onto her equally muddy jeans. She gave up a hysterical little laugh. "Henry, you asked me why I was always messing with makeup." She waved a grimy hand at her black eye. "Is this a subtle enough hint for you?"

"Jen, I'm sorry. I didn't realize." Henry had the decency to look abashed. He gazed at her for a moment. "Look, I know he's dead, but I have to at least offer. D'you want me to beat him up for you?"

"No need. But thanks anyway." Jen hung her head, breathing deeply. Then she looked up at the night sky. Above her, the stars were coming out.

She watched them, a tiny little smile tugging at the corner of her mouth. "We should get going," she said. "I wanna find this killer guy—Krueger, or whatever the fuck his name is—and thank him. Then I'm gonna kill him in a hundred different ways for what he did to Nikki." She paused for a moment. "Even though she was a goth dike, she didn't deserve to die like that."

"Right there with you, sister," said Henry with feeling. "Apart from the goth dike bit." He held out his hand to her. "Come on. Let's get this over with."

As they trudged back toward the car, they could hear the scratchy crackle of the CB radio blaring away. A tinny but unmistakable voice was calling out. "All cars to Parkway and Hawthorn. We have gunshots fired at the Stray Cat bar and grill. Suspect: one white male, mid-forties, one white juvenile, late teens, spotted leaving the scene in a red Toyota. Someone call the dickwads up at Westin Hills, get a containment van down here. Stat."

Henry stared at Ella. "How quickly can you change a tire?" he asked.

Up in room 13B of the Springwood Travel Hotel, Jacob leaned heavily against the inside of the wooden door, hands on his knees, trying to catch his breath after their mad flight from the strip joint. They had hidden their Toyota truck in a lot five blocks away and ran the rest of the way to the hotel, just in case. Kane busied himself in

making sure the place was secure—pulling the curtains, disconnecting the phone, locking the windows.

When the room was fixed to his satisfaction, he crossed over to Jacob and plunked himself down on the edge of the bed, bouncing like a child. "Try to relax," he said. "Would it help if I put some music on?"

Jacob just looked at him.

Kane shrugged. "Suit yourself. I always find Bach takes my mind off things."

Jacob stared at him, shaking his head. "You're a madman," he declared.

"You're a fine one to talk."

"I am. But not now. I'm too mad at you."

"About what?"

Jacob pulled himself up to his full height and glared at Kane.

"Oh. The security guard?"

"What do you think?"

Kane's face twitched slightly. "I told you casualties were necessary," he said.

Jacob opened his mouth to speak but Kane waved his hand irritably, silencing him. "We'll talk about it later. For now—back to business." He got up off the bed and went over to the closet. Opening it, he pulled out a leather pouch and tossed it across the bed. "One Deathstone," he muttered to himself. "And the final ingredient." He reached inside, and pulled out...

"Sarah?" Jacob stared at the terrified young girl as Kane dragged her out of the closet and threw her down on the bed. She was bound hand and foot with thick swathes of black duct tape, her terrified eyes peering out from behind a knotted gag made from a red bandana. A big blue bruise marred one side of her pretty face, but otherwise she seemed to be unharmed. "What? How?"

Jacob's eyes flicked back up to his caseworker, unbelieving. "Kane, what did you do?"

He appeared unmoved. "I did what was necessary."

"Since when does kidnapping become necessary?" Jacob was beside himself. "The guys up at Westin are going nuts trying to find

her!"

"I didn't kidnap her. She came of her own free will. Just as you did."

"But she's all tied up!"

"She changed her mind. I told her there was no going back, but she persisted in trying to escape from me." Kane's eyes were gleaming. "See, she had the dreams too, just as you did. I overheard her talking about them and asked her if she wanted to get rid of Freddy for good. I helped her escape, nobody suspected a thing. But when I told her what was involved, she decided to try to run away from me, the ungrateful little brat. Didn't you, Sarah?"

She looked up at Kane and shook her head mutely, her eyes huge.

"Don't lie to me, Sarah," said Kane calmly. He stroked her fair hair out of her eyes, then checked that her gag was secure. "I hate it when people lie to me." He hesitated, undermining his sense of menace. "But the night is young and we have work to do."

He turned his back on them and plucked the Deathstone off the bed, holding it up against the fluorescent light. Then he reached into his pocket and pulled out a switchblade.

There was a muffled squeal from Sarah. Kane ignored her and opened up the knife, then quickly drew the blade across his own forearm, hissing with pain. Blood seeped out of the thin cut in his flesh. He quickly brought the Deathstone up and let three drops of blood fall onto it. A reddish-black glow came from the depths of the stone.

Kane glanced up to check that the curtains were closed, then advanced on Sarah, knife in hand, holding up the glowing stone. He stopped as Jacob moved to block his way. "Stand aside," he commanded.

Jacob folded his arms, looking Kane right in the eye. "You want me to help you? You'd better explain yourself."

"That I will, boy," Kane said. He glanced behind him and casually picked up a small china lamp from the nightstand. He examined it carefully, as though he were in a store, making a decision about a purchase. "But that can wait."

Spinning around, he brought the lamp down with surgical accuracy across the side of Sarah's head. There was a sickening crack and she pitched forward face down onto the floor.

Jacob stared.

Kane nodded briskly in satisfaction, then set the lamp down carefully and strode toward the felled girl, knife flashing in his hand. Jacob immediately jumped up to block his path, grabbing him by the front of his jacket. "You'd better get the hell away from her, Jack, or I'll—"

"You'll what? Call the cops?" Kane shook his head in amusement, his knife still in his hand, not even bothering to defend himself. "I'm sure they'll be only too pleased to haul your scrawny teenage ass back to the lockup." He nodded down at the unconscious girl. "Now that you've got murder and kidnapping on your rap sheet, I'm sure you'll be out well before your sixtieth birthday. If you behave yourself."

In one quick move he snapped his hands around, breaking Jacob's grip and sending him spinning back across the room. He straightened his jacket carefully. "And I'd be only too happy to help my old buddies with their enquiries. I'm sure they'd give me a medal for turning in a dangerous teenage runaway. You know what they say—once a cop, always a cop and all that."

"You son of a bitch." Jacob glared at Kane, breathing heavily. His gaze descended to the knife in Kane's hand. His muscles tensed as he prepared himself to leap, hoping that he could get the knife away from Kane before he managed to do any serious damage.

"I wouldn't even think about it," said Kane conversationally. "Remember, I also have this." He brushed aside his multicolored waistcoat to reveal the stock of the gun protruding from the waistband of his pants.

"So what next?" Jacob asked. The room suddenly seemed very small to him. He was intensely aware how near to the door he was. He dithered uncertainly, unsure whether to fight to save the girl, or just run for his life.

"It's all up to you now."

"Me?"

"You have to summon Freddy. Remember?"

"And what about Sarah?"

"That's the regrettable part. We have to kill her."

"No fucking way!"

"I'm sorry Jacob. The Dream Demons need her blood."

"The Dream *what*?"

"The guardians of the underworld," said Kane. "I believe it was they who originally gave Freddy his powers. In order to transfer those powers, they require a sacrifice."

"Transfer them? I thought we were just locking him up forever."

"We are," said Kane smoothly. "But we have to take his powers away from him first. What if he somehow got free?"

"So his powers go—where?"

Kane clicked the safety catch back on his gun and tucked it carefully away into his waistband. "I take his powers. They go into me."

"But you're alive!"

Kane nodded thoughtfully. "True. But they shouldn't harm me. And in the event of my death, I'll have the power to come back into the land of the living. Through people's dreams."

"And what'll you do then?" Jacob was both appalled and fascinated.

"Whatever I want. I can use Freddy's dream powers for good—saving people, rescuing trapped children from wells, yadda yadda. Stuff like that."

"And me?"

"You get to go free. Back to your old life, if you like. I can pull strings, make everything all right for you. And no more Freddy trying to kill you. Sound good?"

Jacob couldn't tear his eyes off Sarah. "So we get rid of Freddy, I get my life back and you get supernatural powers."

"Right."

"But first we've got to kill Sarah."

Kane clapped his hands together delightedly. "You got it, boy! I always said you were a bright one!"

"Fair enough. There's just one problem with that plan."

"And that is?"

"We're not killing Sarah."

"Jacob, you're not listening," said Kane. "I told you there would be casualties. You wanna make an omelet? You've gotta break a few eggs! And this is one big freakin' omelet we're talking about making here, my friend."

"I'm not your friend. And Sarah's not an egg, you lunatic." Jacob crouched down next to Sarah and gently scooped her hair back from where the blood had pooled around her face. He tilted her head up so Kane could see her pretty, porcelain features. "Look at her, Kane. She's innocent. She doesn't deserve to die."

"Nobody deserves to die, kiddo, but that's life," snapped Kane, rapidly losing patience. He raised his knife. "The world is teeming with little girls just like her. Nobody's going to miss just one more brat." He stalked toward her. "She told me she wanted Krueger dead. I'm just following through her final wishes." Kane wiped his forehead on a cuff. He was sweating. "You have to make a decision somewhere down the line, Jacob. Do you want to get rid of Freddy Krueger, once and for all, or do you want him to keep on killing?"

"I told you." Jacob tapped his head sharply. "I've got it all under control." But he didn't look confident.

"For how long? Hmm? And what if I do this?" Kane's hand flew to his waistcoat and suddenly he was holding the gun. He pointed it at Jacob's head.

Jacob stared into the barrel of the gun and swallowed.

"Your move, kid," said Kane, cocking the trigger.

In the back seat of the car, Jen swallowed an aspirin and groaned. "Okay. I officially feel gross. Could we go back to my place for a shower before we go tackle the mad serial killer, please?"

Sally ignored her, concentrating on the road.

"Well, I think you're all a bunch of spoilsports," said Jen, folding her arms. "I don't get into some clean clothes very soon, there may well be deaths."

"I know her. She's not kidding," said Henry.

"Think back, Jen," said Ella, turning round in her seat. "Do you remember what happened?"

Jen rubbed her eyes. "It was like I had a kind of blackout. I was just sitting there, daydreaming, and suddenly my head was all full of death and blood. And there was this strange noise—like nails on a blackboard. Then I saw Krueger, creeping up on Henry. I don't remember much after that."

"What were you daydreaming about?"

"Oh, the usual. I was mad at Henry, so I was just fantasizing about the dozen ways I'd like to kill him." She got a sudden shock of realization. "Oh!"

"So you were thinking about how you'd like to kill him and then you were actually trying to kill him?"

"I didn't do it on purpose!"

"I'm not saying you did." Ella turned to Sally, a pensive look on her face. "Any thoughts? You know about this kind of stuff. Could this be related to the not-dreaming thing? Perhaps she was hallucinating?"

Sally looked doubtful. "It's possible," she said. "But you should be able to distinguish between daydreaming and fantasizing. Daydreams are uncontrolled, unconnected images in your mind. They have no direction or purpose and you might not even be aware you're daydreaming. It's kind of like the brain resting, like reorganizing your wallet when you're stuck in traffic." She rubbed her chin thoughtfully. "Fantasies are different. They're more controlled and conscious, like a movie script written in our minds. They're more like wish fulfillment, where you imagine doing something you really want to do."

Henry snorted with laughter. Sally ignored him. "Perhaps if you were very sleep-deprived, fantasizing about something could theoretically trigger a hallucination about the same thing. It would be like you were programming your brain. But you'd have to be very out of it to believe that it was actually happening, or to act on it in the real world." She turned the wheel and applied the gas, urging the car up a steep hill. "I've heard of sleepwalking, but never sleep-killing."

A memory flashed into Ella's head. "Jacob said that I shouldn't dream, or Freddy would get me," she said, worried. "Maybe he knows

something we don't?"

"Maybe," said Sally. "But then, he could just be your average crazy." She turned the wheel, slowing as they approached the hotel. "In the meantime, let's just try to stay focused. We have a killer to catch."

Up in the hotel room, Jacob stood frozen, staring down the barrel of the gun that Kane pointed at his head. On the floor, the unconscious form of Sarah moaned slightly, rolling over. Kane didn't so much as glance at her.

"You can't live forever, Jacob," Kane continued, his voice faraway. "That's a very arrogant point of view. Eventually, Krueger will be free again and then you've lost. Is that what you want? Your father's killer, free to enjoy torturing, maiming and killing whoever he wants, whenever he wants?" He paused, dropping his voice. "Like he killed your foster parents?"

A whiplash of reaction crossed Jacob's face. He licked his lips and gave Kane a hard, almost pleading stare. Several conflicting expressions crawled across his face and his gaze flicked down to Sarah.

"I know you didn't do it, Jacob," said Kane, lowering the gun. His voice was low and soothing. "I know it was Freddy. They had no right to lock you up like that. It wasn't your fault."

Jacob stared at Kane, then slowly shook his head. "They didn't believe me," he said, his voice barely audible.

"I know they didn't. I was there. Remember?"

"I tried to tell them what happened." Jacob pulled anxiously at his blood-flecked shirt. "They said I was crazy. But it was him. He tricked me. He made it look like..." Jacob thumped his forehead with his clenched fist, closing his eyes. "I thought I was killing him, but really I was killing..." His voice faltered and he looked down, scratching at the remains of the dried blood on his fingernails. A

moment ticked past, during which Sarah's light breathing was audible from floor level. "Will this work?" Jacob asked, eventually.

Kane nodded vigorously. "Absolutely, my boy. I told you. We trap Krueger's essence in this stone, he's gone. Forever. Your father's death will be avenged and you can get on with your life. No more killing, no more deaths. Think about it. One tiny life, to spare the lives of hundreds of innocent people." He reached out and touched Jacob's bloodstained palm with a finger. "And the choice is in your hands."

Jacob breathed in deeply, then let the air out of his lungs with a world weary sigh. "What do you want me to do?"

Kane nodded toward the door. "Go outside. Keep watch. I'll take care of the rest."

Jacob tipped his head to one side and looked at Sarah's unconscious form for a long moment. Her hair had fallen across her face and she looked peaceful, almost as if she was sleeping.

"She won't feel a thing," Kane said softly. "I'll make sure of that."

Jacob nodded his head almost imperceptibly. Then he marched resolutely toward the door without looking back.

Ella jumped out of the car and crunched up the gravel drive toward the hotel. Above her, the lights in the guest rooms glowed brightly. The wind whipped up and behind the hotel a train glided out of the station, its horn blaring.

Ella glanced back over her shoulder at the others as they clambered out of the car, almost dancing with impatience. "Come on! The cops'll be here any minute!"

"I'm hurrying!" Henry stood with his head buried in the trunk of the car, rooting around frantically. "Can't find my flashlight."

"You don't need it."

"I do. There could be anything in there. Spiders, evil trolls, crazy undead serial killers..."

"Forget it. I'm gonna run on ahead. There's no time."

"But—"

"See you in there."

Ella began jogging toward the building, her heart thumping loudly in her chest. She felt drawn toward it by some unexplained force, as if she knew already that Jacob would be in there. She had to get to him before the cops did. She had no idea why, but a big part of her desperately wanted to see this strange, intense boy again. She knew that he was connected to the killings somehow, but something told her that he was not dangerous. She'd felt it before in the MediLab and she felt it now.

But could she trust her feelings? Or was she going crazy too?

She reached the main door of the hotel, paused, and then, on a hunch, ran around the back of the shabby dark building, ending up in an alleyway strewn with rubble and garbage. She quickly located the back door and tugged on the handle. To her relief, it was unlocked. She glanced up the alleyway, straining her ears to pick up the tell-tale sound of approaching sirens, but the air was quiet.

Satisfied, she reached out her hand toward the back door.

"They're not here yet. Don't worry."

Ella jumped and spun around, her heart in her mouth. She stared wildly into the shadows. After a moment she made out the dark shape of a boy sitting cross-legged on top of a low dumpster, a few yards from the door. She recognized the voice immediately. "Jacob," she breathed.

The shadow moved, compacting as Jacob unfurled himself from his sitting position. He rolled to one side and jumped down gracefully off the dumpster, then ambled up to Ella, silent as a ghost.

Ella watched him warily. "They're coming for you," she said. "The cops, I mean."

Jacob said nothing. He stopped in front of her, his face a mesh of overlapping blue light and shade in the twilight. "I know," he said quietly.

"You should get out of here."

Jacob shook his head firmly. "No," he said. "Not this time. No more running away. I've made my choice."

"What choice?"

"You wouldn't understand."

"Try me."

Jacob leaned in closer to Ella. Distant lamplight glinted in his eyes. "It's all about choices, right? You have to make a decision at some point, or nothing will ever change." He reached out to touch her face, lightly stroking back her hair. Ella tensed, but didn't pull away.

"So you've gotta ask yourself, do you want to go on as you are now, hoping things will get better? Or do you want to do something that will make a difference? I mean, *really* make a difference. Not just pretend." Jacob stood still, his head cocked slightly to one side as though listening to distant voices, then laughed to himself. "Doesn't matter now. It's too late. I can't be blamed for making a decision."

"Jacob, I don't know what you're talking about—hey!" Ella let out a yip of surprise as Jacob suddenly stepped in close, seized her arms and pressed a hard kiss on her lips. He tasted of blood and dirt, and after a second Ella broke away and tried to shove him backward. "What are you doing?" She practically yelled at him.

"It doesn't matter," said Jacob. He stepped in closer to Ella and grabbed her by the arm. "You're just one person. I can do what I want with you. There's plenty more girls where you came from. One person doesn't matter."

"Okay, you've officially lost it." Ella tried to pull herself away, but Jacob's grip was surprisingly strong. "And if you don't let go of me in the next three seconds, you're going to be officially dead. Get off me!"

To her surprise, Jacob let her go. Ella quickly backed up a couple of steps, rubbing at her bruised bicep and glaring at Jacob.

Jacob turned away from her, scuffing his feet in the dust. "I'm not crazy," he said, to no one in particular. "I'm not. I just want to change the world, that's all. Make it better. But I've never had a chance." He tilted his head downward, his face vanishing into deep shadow. "Till today."

"What's happening today?"

"He's going to kill her," said Jacob simply. He swung around to face Ella. "But it's not my fault. I'm not like him. He's the one doing it, not me!"

"Okay, whoa. Hang on a moment. *Who's* going to kill *who*?"

"Kane. He's gonna make things right. But he has to kill her first."

"Slow down. Who's Kane?"

"Doesn't matter now. She's probably dead already."

Ella reached out and grabbed Jacob by the collar. "Who, Jacob? Slow down. Talk to me."

"There's no point. She has to die. To stop him."

"Kane?"

"No. Freddy."

"Freddy, as in Krueger?"

Jacob nodded. "You see him too?"

"Unless there's another badly-dressed, knife-wielding maniac who lives around here, yes."

A look of panic flooded Jacob's eyes. He seized Ella by the shoulders. "Then they'll come after you too! Don't tell anyone you've seen him. Don't say his name. Don't tell your parents, don't tell the cops. Especially not the cops. They'll take you away, lock you up. Make you think you're crazy." Jacob suddenly flinched as a police siren whirled in the distance. "You should go. Or he'll kill you too."

"Jacob—"

"You don't understand. Don't get involved. Trust me on this."

Jacob reached out a hand to stroke Ella's cheek. Ella slapped it away. "Two of my best friends died today, Jacob. I'm already involved. And if you don't cut the crazy and tell me exactly what's going on, you're gonna wish that I was never born."

Jacob stared at Ella for a long moment. He opened his mouth to speak.

"Ella!"

Ella glanced over her shoulder to see Henry jogging toward her, followed at a short distance by Jen and Dr Spencer. "He's over here!" Ella called.

Henry panted up to her and skidded to a halt. "Who's over where?" he asked.

"Jacob. He's right..." Ella turned round. "Oh," she said.

Jacob had gone.

In the darkness of the hotel room, Kane stared down at the unconscious form of Sarah, as he finished his incantations. The Deathstone lay in his outstretched palm, humming with power. Purple and black plasma energy crackled in the air, making the hairs on the back of his neck stand up.

Kane smiled in satisfaction. This was it. The moment he had been planning for and dreaming about for years.

Very soon, Freddy's power would be his.

On the floor, Sarah twitched and rolled over. Kane looked at her, then reached out and prodded her with the toe of his boot. "Rise and shine, sleepyhead," he whispered. A perverse part of him wanted her to be awake, so he could see her fear when he killed her.

He had heard that Freddy enjoyed that.

He studied Sarah from every angle. He was doing nothing wrong here. She deserved to die. The world was full of kids. Millions and millions of them. In fact, the girl looked almost like one of the girls from his kindergarten class, a girl called Suzy who always used to make fun of him because his pants were too short and he stuttered when he spoke.

Suzy was a little bitch. All the kids were.

They all deserved to die.

Kane placed the Deathstone on Sarah's belly. Then he reached into his pocket and slowly, almost reverently, brought out his knife.

Crash! The door burst open and Jacob ran into the room. "We've got company!"

"What?" Kane strode rapidly over to the window and pulled back the curtain. Red and blue lights washed over the ceiling. "Damn!" He put his knife away. "Distract them for me. I just need five more minutes."

"We don't have five more minutes. They're out the back too. We have to get out of here, right now!"

"You mean *you* have to get out of here. I'm staying."

"There's no time, Kane. We have to go. Now!"

Kane sighed. Then he bent down and grabbed hold of Sarah, throwing her across his back in a fireman's lift. "You go first," he said gruffly, dropping the Deathstone into the back pocket of his jeans.

"Distract them, get rid of them, whatever. I don't care. Just do it! I'll hide the girl." He hoisted the unconscious form of Sarah a little higher up on his shoulder. "Meet me at the train station in fifteen minutes and we'll finish the job."

"You're the boss," said Jacob unhappily, his eyes riveted to Sarah. He hadn't expected to see her alive again.

Before he could reconcile his emotions, the door flew open a second time. He glanced up at the newcomer. "Ella!" he gasped.

"Jacob, are you okay?" Ella rushed over to him. "You have to tell me about Freddy. We need to know how to stop him before..." Her voice trailed off as she saw Kane looming over her, the limp body of a little girl slung across his back. Her eyes flew to the knife in his hand and she froze. "Kane, I presume," she said weakly.

Kane stared at Ella, then rounded on Jacob, his face turning to thunder. "Who is this?" he growled.

Jacob pulled an apologetic expression. "I dunno. I've never seen this girl before in my life."

"She just said my name!" Kane bellowed. "What have you done, Jacob? Who have you been talking to?"

"Forget it, Kane, just go. She's not important."

"Jacob, she's seen us now. What are you gonna do? Erase her memory?" He stepped over to the bed and dumped Sarah down onto it.

Then he reached into his pocket and pulled out the gun.

"Kane, no!" Jacob shouted.

Ella reacted instantly, diving for the doorway. In the split second before she reached it, Jacob struck out at Kane, smacking the gun out of his grasp. The gun went off, the bullet shattering the glass light shade and the pistol clattered to the floor.

Ella screamed.

On the patterned eiderdown, Sarah stirred, roused by the noise of the gunshot. She raised her head weakly. "Mommy?" she said.

Kane rose to his full height, towering over Jacob. "You ungrateful little pig!" he shouted. "After everything I've done for you—how could you betray me like this?"

"But I—"

"No buts, Jacob." Kane pulled out his knife and marched over to the bed. "We'll just have to move things forward a little bit. Hold her down for me."

"Screw you!"

"Fine!" Kane grabbed Sarah by the throat. Sarah shrieked in fear, still groggy from her concussion.

Then the door flew open a third time. "Police! Drop the weapon!"

Kane sighed testily. "Oh, for crap's sake." Before anyone could react he grabbed the pistol off the floor, then turned and seized Ella by the hair, pulling her into a headlock. "Anyone moves and I blow her face off," he shouted.

"I said drop the weapon!"

"What is this? Doughnut Thursday? Buy one cop, get two free?" Kane glared at the three armed cops braced in the doorway. "Jacob? You just going to sit there like a lemon, or are you going to help me?"

"I don't know. I don't think we should..."

Kane drew back the hammer on the pistol. Ella gave a cry of fear and squeezed her eyes tight shut. On the bed, Sarah started crying.

"Okay, fine!" Jacob gritted his teeth and closed his eyes, summoning the dream energy in the room. The energies swiftly coalesced, swirling around his head in a ghostly cloud before focusing into five beams of white light.

Then he opened his eyes and turned toward the cops, directing the full force of his will toward them. The light shot down toward Jacob's head and poured out through his eyes in a piercing burst, catching the police full in the face with the blast.

And nothing happened.

A moment later, the light died from the room.

Jacob blinked. The cops were still standing there in the doorway, aiming their guns at him. One of them, a tall guy with lively black hair, clicked the safety catch off. "This is your last warning!" he shouted.

"Or what, you'll shoot me, you lily-livered pussy?" growled a very familiar voice from the back of the room.

Jacob turned. His eyes widened. "Oh, you gotta be kidding me!" he protested.

SIXTEEN

The train station was deserted at this time of night, the only sound being the mournful rush of wind whistling through the girders of the tin roof. In the distance, a signal bell clanged and moments later a solitary train pulled up to the platform with a creak of ancient carriages.

Jacob raced down the steps, three at a time. "Come on. We've got to get out of here!" he yelled.

Ella puffed down the steps behind him. "We have to go back!"

"There's no time!" Jacob reached the bottom of the stairs and grabbed hold of the rail, spinning himself down onto the platform. "He'll kill us all!"

"Slow down, the pair of you!" Jen ran down the steps behind them, closely followed by Henry. Dr Spencer brought up the rear, her auburn hair flying. The five of them reached the bottom of the stairs and ran across the platform to the waiting train. Jacob pounded on the door release button, almost dancing with impatience. After an agonizingly long delay the doors hissed open and they ran inside.

The carriage was empty, but Jacob ran down the aisle into the next car, then the next, getting as far away from the platform as possible. Finally he reached the end of the train by the driver's cab and collapsed into a seat, craning his neck to peer anxiously out of the window. The platform was empty. A moment later the train gave an arthritic creak and began moving, shuffling out of the station with a belligerent clang of bells.

Jacob buried his head in his hands. "He's here. How can he be here? It wasn't supposed to work that way!"

"What wasn't supposed to work what way?"

"The plan. There was a plan. Kane was supposed to—he wanted me to—oh, God, what has he done?"

"So that was the late, great Frederick Krueger, I'm guessing," said Dr Spencer wryly.

Jacob nodded dumbly.

"Well, I don't see what all the fuss was about," said Henry, putting his feet up on the seat opposite. "He looked fairly normal to me. Hat, check. Christmas sweater, check. Huge razor-knives attached to creepy gardening gloves, check." He shrugged. "Obviously a standup citizen."

"How did he find us?" said Jen, her eyes wide with fear.

"It was all Kane's idea," said Jacob, shaking his head. "He used me to lure him out, to summon him. He wanted to strip him of his powers and trap his spirit in the Deathstone. But something went wrong. It must have gone wrong."

He sat forward in his seat, his eyes dark with exhaustion. "Kane must have been interrupted. Then, when I released all that dream power, Freddy's spirit went into Kane." Jacob swallowed, feeling bile rise in his throat. "The way he killed those three cops; they shouldn't have fired on him like that. Bullets only make him mad—oh God, they're gonna lock me up for life this time!"

"Would someone please tell me what the hell is going on?" cried Jen. "Are you all on drugs? What's a Deathstone? And I thought that Freddy guy was supposed to be dead?"

"He is," said Jacob. "But Kane brought him back. We had a plan..."

"Yeah, great plan buddy," snapped Henry. "Resurrect the homicidal maniac and stand around screaming like a baby, while he butchers three very nice policemen and a little girl in cold blood, and you let that one off the drawing board why, exactly?"

"I told you! It wasn't meant to go like that. I thought we were helping."

"Yeah, just like you 'helped that little girl," muttered Henry. "Leaving her behind like that. We could've taken Freddy, the five of us—we could've got to her in time."

"She would've slowed us down," mumbled Jacob. "No point in us all dying."

The train's lights flickered as it passed under a bridge. Jacob folded his arms defiantly and glanced out of the window as the silence stretched between them. A spray of sparks lit up the darkness outside the train as the driver braked on the turn.

"She might still be alive," offered Ella, breaking the hostile silence.

"Did you see the size of that guy's knives?" Henry shuddered. "Poor kid."

"I still don't see why we had to take the train. We had a very serviceable car..." Jen broke off, looking at Henry sternly. "Well, it was a car, at least. We could be miles away by now."

Jacob shook his head. "No good. He gets into your mind—makes you see things. We would've lasted about ten minutes before we ended up wrapped around a tree. At least with a train we have a chance to get away." Jacob looked up. "These things are automatic, right? There's no driver?"

The others stared at him. In the ringing silence, they could very clearly hear the sound of a radio crackling through the metal door that separated them from the cab.

A man's voice was humming along.

Jacob moved first, exploding out of his seat and tugging frantically at the emergency cord. It came off in his hand. Slowly, he turned and looked at the others, who stared back at him, horrified. As one, they leapt to their feet and pounded on the door to the driver's cab.

"Stop the train! You have to stop the train!" Jacob yelled. "Open the door! We have to get off this train—oh fuck!"

Four silver knives burst through the door, puncturing the thick metal as though it were cardboard. Dr Spencer gasped as one of the knives slashed open her suit, impaling her through her shoulder with a sharp sluicing sound.

The knife withdrew and she crumpled to the floor.

"Sally!" Ella rushed to her aid. Sally Spencer stared stupidly at the bright wash of crimson seeping through her expensive suit and swore, weakly reaching out a hand to touch the blood. An instant later she was thrown forward as the door rocked with a savage blow. A welt appeared in the top of the door, then another, then another. The metal started to split with an alarming creak, weakened by the sledgehammer-like blows.

"Get her out of here!" Ella was frantic. She grabbed Sally under the arms, ignoring her cry of pain, and dragged her bodily away from the door.

"Run!" yelled Jacob.

Behind them, the door rattled in its frame under a fresh onslaught of blows. Smoke started to hiss from beneath it. Jacob danced back and forth impatiently along the aisle. "Leave her! He'll kill us all!" he shouted.

The others stared at him.

"I didn't hear that," snapped Ella. She glared at Jacob, giving him her most withering stare. Fury lent her voice strength. "You! Help us move her. Right now!"

Jacob unwillingly jogged back down the aisle, his gaze fixed on the vibrating door. Henry and Jen took a hand apiece and pulled the stricken psychiatrist to her feet. Together, they half carried, half dragged Sally down the carriage toward the door, bumping into seats and support poles. They reached the far door separating the compartments and stumbled through it, slamming it behind them.

Jacob slumped down against the door, his eyes wide, staring at nothing.

Ella grabbed his arm and tried to pull him onward. "What are you doing? This is no time to give up!"

"Are you kidding? This is a perfect time to give up!" Jacob whimpered. "There's nowhere to go. We're trapped on this train. We're all going to die."

"Shut your mouth, or I'll shut it for you!"

"Henry!"

"He's getting on my nerves!" Henry glared at Jacob. "We're all gonna die, indeed. What B-movie are you from, exactly? Your parents must be real proud of you."

"My parents are dead!" said Jacob. "Freddy killed them. And he's gonna kill me too, and you with me." He stared furiously at Henry. "That door won't hold him forever, dumb fuck. You want to be responsible for the death of everyone in here? Keep on yapping." He glanced around quickly, then leapt up. "Come on. We gotta shore up this door. If we can trap him, we might stand a chance."

Without waiting for a reply, Jacob started ripping up seats in the carriage, his wiry muscles bulging as he pulled the thin plastic chairs away from their metal frames. Years in the institution had hardened him and for the first time he put it to good use. With a strength born

of terror he tore a long metal pole free from under one of the seats, jamming it through the handle of the door separating the compartments. Then he stepped back and snapped a swift, powerful kick at it, bending it up into a U shape and sealing the door. After a moment of sulky silence Henry joined in, pulling wooden panels off the wall and shoving them under the door, forming a crude doorjam.

Ella helped Dr Spencer to a seat. She collapsed into it, clutching at her shoulder, deathly pale. "What does he want?" gasped Sally. "Why is he trying to kill us?"

"Because that's what he does." Jacob leaned back, struggling with a stubborn panel. "He kills because he enjoys it."

Sally shook her head, struggling to sit up. "I don't buy that. Everyone's got a motive, a reason why they do things."

"Yeah, and Freddy's feeling real motivated to kill us," said Henry. "But ten out of ten for the shrink job."

"He's a human being," Sally persisted. "Or he was one. Everyone wants something, right? So what does Freddy want?"

In the next carriage, the sounds of frustrated banging grew louder.

"All of us dead?" suggested Jen. The threat of imminent death seemed to have focused her. Compared to the rest of them, she seemed positively cheerful.

"He was killed by a lynch mob, yes?" said Sally. "So perhaps he wants to avenge his own death?"

"Yeah, yeah, keep up, Grandma. He wants to kill the kids of the guys who murdered him—same old, same old," snapped Jacob. "But you guys weren't involved in all that shit. He wants to kill me because I'm stopping people from dreaming and he can't get back into the real world. He wants to kill you because you're in his way. Simple as that."

"You've really lost the plot, haven't you?" said Jen, sounding almost admiring.

Light flooded the carriage as the train whooshed through a station. It showed no sign of stopping. Jacob rubbed his arms anxiously, glancing out of the window. The banging next door seemed to have stopped, but he knew this was not a good sign.

"Freddy was a serial killer, right?" said Sally doggedly.

"Right, whatever." Jacob paced back and forth, thinking.

"Well, perhaps we can work with that." Sally winced, clutching at her punctured shoulder. "I did a study on serial killers for my finals. A lot of them are brain-damaged in some way—usually through some kind of head trauma sustained whilst growing up. Or sometimes they're just born with something neurologically wrong with their brains." Sally coughed, her face contorting in pain. "But one thing they all have in common is they lack empathy—they don't have the ability to sympathize with how other people are feeling."

"I've met people like that. They're called men," said Jen.

"I'm serious. You could beg, you could cry, you could scream for your life and your average full-blooded serial killer wouldn't give a shit. He'd just see you as an object, a thing that he could use for his own foul purposes before discarding. He'd be coldly logical about the whole thing, rationalizing it to a point where he thinks that he's doing the right thing by killing you."

"Does she ever shut up?" snapped Jacob, staring at the door.

Sally sat up with an effort, becoming even paler. "If we want to defeat Freddy, we need to think on his terms. Without emotion. Just using logic. Unless someone happens to have a flamethrower handy." She snorted with amusement. "I think I'm a little hysterical. Could someone pass me a tissue, please?"

Jacob reached out and grabbed Jen's pink sweater, which was tied around her waist. Before she could protest he ripped a sleeve off of it and folded it up, pressing it over the wound in Sally's shoulder to stop the bleeding. "Here. Use this."

"Hey! That was Prada!"

"Yeah, well now it's nada. You want Mrs Freud here to kick the bucket before she's finished her psychobabble? I'm sure we're all dying to know exactly why Freddy's about to kill us." Jacob stood up, dusting off his hands. "Okay, door's sealed. We gotta go, kids."

Together, they helped Dr Spencer to her feet and stumbled down the aisle toward the next carriage. They were nearly at the second set of doors when a loud crash echoed and the sound of tearing metal filled the air. Then everything fell silent.

Jen peered over her shoulder, nervous. "Perhaps he gave up?"

"Don't say that. Never say that."

They all piled through into the next carriage. It was deserted, as was the one after that and the one after that. Finally, they reached the other end of the train and could go no further. The girls sat down, exhausted, while Jacob and Henry went to secure the door behind them.

Ella examined Sally's wound gingerly. It was bleeding profusely and her arms and shoulders were drenched with blood. She was deathly pale from shock.

Ella manipulated the reading lamp on the ceiling above, trying to get more light on the wound, when there was a gentle cough from behind them. Ella looked up to see a ticket inspector hovering nervously in the aisle by the end door, his gaze flicking from one to the next with an expression of horrified fascination.

Ella glanced at the others in surprise, then winched her lips up into something resembling a normal expression. She could imagine how they must all look: Jen and Henry soaked through and caked in mud, herself and the other two splattered with blood, Sally looking like a car crash victim. The inspector obviously hadn't heard the commotion at the other end of the train and looked faintly bemused as to why the train had sailed through the last three stations without stopping.

Nevertheless, he did what he was trained to do and reached for his ticket machine. "Tickets, please," he said, unable to take his eyes off Ella and the other four crazy people bleeding all over his nice clean carriage.

"We don't have any," said Ella. "Look, there's been an accident. The driver's been... hurt. Please tell me you know how to stop the train."

The ticket inspector's expression turned to one of alarm. "I dunno," he said. "I'm new here. They've only just taught me how to use the coffee machine."

"Do you have a radio? Some way of contacting the station?"

"No, nothing like that."

Ella sagged, her hopeful expression turning to one of despair. "We're screwed, then."

"Wait a minute—what's this button do?" the inspector peered at a control panel mounted into the wall by the door.

"What button?" Ella jumped to her feet and ran toward him, her eyes alive with hope. He beckoned her to him and put a hand on her shoulder, guiding her to the panel. Ella's brow knitted in confusion as she surveyed the bewildering tangle of wires and switches. There was a large green button in the middle of the red panel. Ella hesitated, then reached out a finger toward it.

"Ella get away from him!" Jen screamed.

Ella jumped and turned to face the ticket inspector. He beamed down at her, the smile frozen on his face.

His skin was melting.

As Ella backed off in horror, the skin of his face suddenly detached and slid forward over his features like a cheap Halloween mask. His flesh liquified, then reformed into a face from her worst nightmares.

Then the ticket inspector was gone and Freddy stood in his place, in full uniform, grinning manically. He raised his blood-stained fingerknives and spread them in front of him like a fan, then reached down to turn the handle of the fare collecting machine strung around his neck.

"Tickets please," he said.

On the other side of town, Officer Goodman ran down the brightly lit corridor of the deserted police station to answer the single, ringing phone. He was supposed to be off duty now, but what with all the paperwork the day had generated he'd decided to stay late, to catch up on some of his filing and get a head start on tomorrow.

Grumbling under his breath, he seized the phone off its hook to shut it up. "Springwood PD?"

"Goodman? That you?" Sheriff Williams asked.

Officer Goodman swallowed his gum and stood up straighter. "Yessir!"

"I need a chopper and as many units as you can get to Parkway train station. Charge it to the account and get your ass out here, right

now."

"Have you found the boy?"

There was a pause on the other end. "You could say that."

In the rear carriage of the moving train, the five friends stood in a frozen little tableau, hypnotized by the grinning maniac in front of them. Freddy's warped, scarred face was alight with a feral joy. He looked eagerly from one to the next, clicking his fingerknives impatiently on the ticket machine. He knew he had them and he intended to make the most of it.

"No tickets?" he rasped, his eyes glinting with pleasure. "You know there's a penalty fare?" He looked sidelong at Ella and licked his lips slowly, grotesquely.

Jacob was the first to react. "Run!" he yelled, shattering the spell. Without waiting for a reply, he whirled and sprinted down the aisle toward the end door—the one that he had just spent five minutes barricading. A long metal pole was jammed through the lock, sealing it shut.

Jacob stared down at the damaged lock, as though the very heat of his gaze could melt it open, then grabbed the handle and rattled it frantically, futilely. He had to get out of there. He couldn't let Freddy win, not after all this time.

There was a strangled yelp from behind him. Jacob whipped around to see that Freddy had Dr Spencer by the throat and had hoisted her up off the ground, as though she weighed no more than a child. The others were huddled together on the opposite side of the seats, a look of abject terror on their faces.

"Let go of her, you freak!" Ella ran up to Freddy and beat at him uselessly with her fists. Freddy sneered down at her then gave a contemptuous flick of his wrist, shoving Ella away from him. Ella flew the length of the carriage and crashed into a window. Glass clattered to the ground and Ella slid to the floor, dazed and bleeding. The cool night breeze entered the carriage, sending trash whirling into the air.

"You're all my children now!" laughed Freddy. Dr Spencer kicked and struggled uselessly, coughing and choking as his grip tightened around her throat. Freddy's eyes blazed with mirth as he pulled back his arm, preparing to strike.

Without even thinking, Jacob wrenched the metal pole out of the lock and sprinted back down the carriage. "Get away from her!" he yelled. Then he brought the pole down in a sweeping arc that should have taken Freddy's head off. But before the metal even made contact there was a flash of light and the top half of the pole melted clean away. Pain shot through his hand and Jacob dropped the red-hot pole. It hit the ground with a clatter and vanished in an implosion of blue smoke. He backed up, furious and frustrated. "Let her go!" he cried.

Freddy only sniggered, then spitefully lashed out with his knife-glove, slicing Sally's arm open as she raised it feebly in defense. "That all ya got? Ooh, you're scary!" he taunted, grinning widely. "C'mon, hero. I'm serious. Try again. Give me one reason I should let her go."

Jacob cast around frantically for a weapon, his mind racing. What was it Sally had said about defeating Krueger? He wished he could remember.

Even as the thought hit him, he saw that the doctor's lips were moving as she whispered something to Freddy, fighting to get the words out from her crushed windpipe. Jacob stepped back, his muscles bunched and ready to fight, but to his surprise Krueger was no longer paying him any attention, concentrating instead on Sally.

As he watched, Freddy's expression turned from anger to one of suspicion. He frowned, then cocked his head to one side like a dog, listening intently. Then a look of puzzled wonder spread over his face. "So," he said slowly, "you think that I only kill because I had a traumatic upbringing and my peers rejected me, so I took to getting back at society in the only way I knew how?"

Sally nodded with difficulty, then whispered something else, struggling for air. Freddy rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "And I should let you go because it's not really you I'm trying to kill, but aspects of myself that I hate that I'm trying to murder?"

Sally nodded an affirmative, then whispered again into Freddy's decayed ear, her breath hissing through her bruised throat.

Freddy's eyebrows flew up in suspicion. "So, it's pointless for me to keep on killing, because everyone I wanted to punish is dead, and I've avenged my own death and can rest now? Huh? Is that it?"

Sally nodded weakly. All around her, the others watched with bated breath as Freddy carefully lowered Dr Spencer to the ground, mulling over her words. He reached up to scratch his head with the tips of his fingerknives, drawing blood. He didn't appear to notice.

"Interesting theory," he said. Then his hand lashed out and he lifted Sally off the ground again. Her legs flailed in the air and she started to choke. "But totally wrong. You see, I kill because I enjoy it. That's all."

Dr Spencer thrashed around madly, blood streaming down her shoulder, fighting to free herself from Freddy's iron grip.

Freddy smiled cruelly. "Analyze *this*, bitch!"

With that, he casually lopped Sally's head off.

For a second, nobody moved. The decapitated head bounced once on the floor, then rolled down the carriage to where the others stood, frozen in shock.

"Now that's a *real* head-job!" Freddy dropped the decapitated body. "Anyone else got a theory?"

The carriage erupted into a riot of confusion. The others turned and bolted for the door, pushing and shoving each other out of the way in their frantic bid for freedom.

Freddy grinned widely. "Thought not," he said.

Then he was after them, stalking down the aisle, laughing uproariously with the fun of it all. They fled down the carriageway ahead of him, shrieking in panic. As they passed the prone form of Ella, Henry grabbed her and bodily hauled her upright, shaking her roughly. "C'mon girlie, on your feet. We gotta go!"

Ella's eyes focused on the rapidly approaching Freddy and suddenly launched herself out of their arms toward the door, which was shaking under an onslaught of frantic kicks from Jacob. She reached him just as the door gave way, debris flying out from

underneath it. Jacob yanked it wide open and ran through, followed quickly by the others.

Together, they ran down the train, boots clanging on the steel flooring. Freddy followed them, cackling loudly. He punched his gloved hand upwards, smashing the carriage light, then dragged his fingerknives with a flourish along the metal walls.

Screeeeeeeeeeeeecchhhhhh!

The carriage filled with the horrible sound, earsplittingly loud and Freddy laughed, enjoying the hunt. Ahead of him the terrified teenagers clapped their hands over their ears and continued their flight, running mindlessly even though they knew there was nowhere to run to.

Freddy's black heart leapt at the sight.

Ah, the chase, the hunt, the kill.

It was a pattern as old as nature herself, where that she was, and every cell in him thrummed with anticipation. This was the way it should be and Freddy was keen to enjoy every single twisted second of it.

He waved a hand toward the fleeing kids and the door in front of them banged shut. The blonde girl yanked it open again and fled through it with a cry of fear, the two boys hot on her heels, but the brunette was a second too slow. Another wave of Freddy's hand and the metal support poles on either side of the door twisted themselves free, then wove themselves over the door like creeping ivy on speed, sealing it shut.

The brunette tugged at it frantically, then turned to face him as he strode toward her, flattening her back against the door, her face a stark mask of terror. The lighting in the whole train flickered off and on spasmodically, burning a vision of the approaching Freddy into her retinas.

There was nowhere left for her to run.

Freddy smiled wickedly. Then he raised his knives and stepped toward her.

Next door, Ella paused mid-flight as a piercing scream rang through the carriage. "Jen!" she gasped. She stopped dead, and Jacob and Henry almost ploughed into the back of her.

"We can't help her now. Keep going!" cried Jacob.

"You really don't get it, do you?" Ella yelled. "You don't just give up on people!"

Shaking his head, Jacob tried to push past Ella, but she grabbed him and threw him back. Jacob rebounded off the wall and spun round angrily. "What's your deal?"

"My deal is that my friend is about to be killed!" snapped Ella. "And I'm going back to save her. You want to run away like a big cry baby? Be my guest. Henry!"

"What?"

"Go try and stop the train. I'm going back."

"No way, dude!"

Ella swung round and seized him by the lapels. "Henry. If you don't stop the train, we're all going to die. You know about all that technical stuff, levers and gadgets and whatnot. How 'bout you quit flappin' your yap and go save a life?"

Henry looked at her unhappily, mouth open to protest, then he saw the look in Ella's eyes. He stepped forward swiftly and planted a quick kiss on her lips, then turned and ran off down the carriage.

Ella turned to Jacob, blustering to cover her embarrassment. "I sure am getting lucky today."

Jacob just looked at her and raised an eyebrow, blood running down his face as another disembodied scream tore through the air. He watched her go, several conflicting expressions fighting each other on his face. Then he banged his fist on the seat rack and set off after her.

In the next car, Jen cowered by the door as Freddy sauntered toward her, grinning from ear to ear. "You know what I love most about women?" said Krueger, flashing his blades. "Killing them." He

tipped his rotted head onto one side, regarding her thoughtfully. "You're a little old for me, but you'll do."

"I'll give you anything you want," sobbed Jen.

Freddy looked her up and down, then shook his head. "The only thing I could want from you is already gone, my little cherry pie," he said, leering at her. Jen blushed. "Too bad you were too busy out screwing boys behind your boyfriend's back to save yourself for him. Is that why he hated you?"

"My boyfriend's dead," Jen almost shouted.

"Good thing too, 'cos he'd beat the shit out of you if he knew what a little slut you are." He smiled. "That Mathew boy—now *he* was entertaining."

"What? How do you know about Matt?" Jen sniffed, backing away.

Freddy just smiled. "He told me all about you. The things you guys did."

Jen bristled. "I don't believe you. We didn'twell, we did, but he *listened* to me. He gave a shit. He made me feel like I mattered."

"Yeah, right, whatever," Freddy sniggered. "You think he liked you for your personality? Then you're stupider than you look. And you look like a retard." Freddy smiled, his eyes bright with malice. "He just wanted to screw you. That's all boys want."

"You're wrong."

"Ah, spare me the sentimental crap, I've heard it all before." Freddy reached out to grab Jen, but she ducked under his reach and danced back along the train away from him. "Anyhow," said Freddy, "the little shit's dead now, so who the fuck cares?"

"He's not dead. He's just miss..." Jen stared at Freddy, horrified. "You didn't?"

Freddy doffed his hat and bowed low, as though collecting an Oscar. When his head came up again, he was smirking.

"You bastard!" Jen ran at Freddy, attacking him in a flail of arms, legs and flashing red fingernails. Freddy tolerated her attack for a moment, laughing, then grabbed her by the arm and viciously slung her across the room, the way one might toss a bag of trash into a dumpster. Jen ploughed into a row of seats, smashing them to

kindling. She raised herself on an elbow, groaning, then dizzily tried to get to her feet.

Freddy smirked to himself and started toward her fallen form, then spun around as a crash came from behind him. *Crump!* The head of an axe came smashing through the door. The metal ivy twined around it screamed in pain and withdrew, solidifying back into ordinary poles and the door abruptly burst open.

Jacob stepped through, closely followed by Ella. "Get away from her, you son of a bitch!" Jacob cried.

Freddy scowled at him. "Don't you dare talk about my mother like that," he snapped. "That's my job. In the meantime—hey!"

His foul body rocked with a sudden impact and he looked down in shock to see a wooden spike projecting from his chest. He sagged slightly, black blood oozing from the wound. "Who dares?"

His head snaked round like a cobra and he eyeballed Jen, who was standing behind him clutching the broken end of a chair support. She gave it a hard twist, her eyes bright with violence, and Freddy yelled in pain before spinning round and dealing her a piledriver blow that knocked her clean to the other end of the carriage. She hit the wall hard, dashing her head on a metal jacket rack with a crack that echoed all the way down. She fell to the ground, unmoving.

Freddy's charred hand closed around the bloody strut projecting from his chest. He sucked in a breath, then yanked it out with a grunt and tossed it onto the floor. His gaze snapped upwards and locked with Jacob's. "Right, you little..."

Suddenly his eyes flew open. Then he screamed, his face blurring and twisting in the flashing light. Beneath his skin, a second set of features became suddenly and shockingly visible, like a moving hologram. The mouth on the second face opened and closed soundlessly, as though trying to speak.

Jacob instantly recognized it.

"Kane!" Jacob turned and ripped a red fire extinguisher off the wall, then swung it at Freddy while he was distracted, catching him a glancing blow on the side of the head. Freddy snarled and struck out at him, but his eyes were unfocussed and the blow went wide. "Ella, it's Kane! He's trying to break free! We have to help him!"

Ella understood quickly and grabbed hold of Freddy's arm as he wrestled with himself, holding him in place while Jacob hit him again and again with the fire extinguisher. With a roar of rage Freddy threw her off him, then doubled over, howling in pain. His form flickered like a cheap fairground illusion, Kane's body clearly visible inside his own.

Suddenly, there was a flash of light and Freddy/Kane fell to his knees. Jacob looked down and saw that he had become Kane again. A white specter stood over him, Freddy's ethereal body glowering at him, before it suddenly span off into the air in an oily black whirlwind. It vanished into the ceiling with a crack of muted thunder, leaving behind nothing but a scorch mark on the cheap tin roofing.

Kane was left behind on the floor, groaning and bleeding.

Jacob rushed to his side. "Kane, you alive, man?"

"Not sure." Kane slumped to the floor, looking around him blearily. His graying hair was sticking up in all directions with static and his normally colorful shirt was stained with blood. "What happened?"

"You were possessed by Freddy. Something went wrong." Jacob looked up, his eyes widening with a sudden realization. "We have to stop this train!"

"We're on a—?"

"Train, yes. Freddy killed the driver. Ella's friend went to try to stop it. We have to help him before Krueger gets ba—"

A sudden jolt rocked the carriage. Jacob was thrown to one side as the floor was blasted into the air in an appallingly loud explosion of dark energy. Electricity crackled and all the lights flickered, then went out. A moment later, Freddy burst through the floor, then swirled to a halt up near the ceiling. He glared down at them, his body lit by an unidentified red light. "What did you do to me?" he yelled. His voice was crackly and distorted, as though the sound was coming through a cheap intercontinental phone line.

"That's none of your concern now," Kane said calmly. Although he looked like death, his personal sense of calm seemed to have returned. With effort, he got to his feet and smoothed down his

pants, looking down at the blood on his hands as though it offended him. Then he rummaged around in his back pocket for the Deathstone. He held it up, aiming it at Freddy like it was some kind of weapon.

He uttered a quiet word and a crack of plasma lightning hit the carriage, filling the air with the sharp tang of ozone. They all recoiled as the plasma shot through Freddy's disembodied form and was sucked into the Deathstone, which began glowing a deep purplish red. The glow flooded up Kane's arm, suffusing his flesh until his entire body was glowing faintly, small beads of electricity crawling across his skin like worms on a corpse.

The others continued backing away, unnerved.

As Jacob watched, the light in the Deathstone went out and Kane's blue eyes flooded with a trickle of silver fire. His skin writhed as his wounds spontaneously regenerated, closing by themselves with tiny flashes of flame. The air hummed as Kane turned his silver gaze on Freddy, his black hair crackling with electricity. "Now that was a dirty trick, Krueger, killing that little girl. You nearly had me there! But things are back on track now."

As he spoke, the light in the Deathstone went out. Kane dropped it back into his top pocket, then stretched out a hand and waved it experimentally, as though shooing away a troublesome swarm of mosquitoes.

Across the room, Freddy flinched, then rocketed up to the ceiling with a howl of rage. He landed with a smack on the roof, sprawling flat on his back. "How dare you?" he roared. Rolling over, he flipped to his feet like an acrobat and stood up on the ceiling, defying gravity as if he was in some cheap eighties music video. He removed his hat, flexed the dent out of it with an audible *pop*, then set it back on his head. Clicking his fingerknives menacingly, he stalked over to Kane and stopped barely three feet away, still upside down, regarding him through narrowed eyes. "So, that's the way it is?" he growled.

Kane inclined his head. "Apparently so."

"So let's do this."

Abruptly Freddy struck out with his gloved hand, aiming to decapitate Kane. His fingerknives passed right through him.

Kane laughed. "Dream powers only, it seems. Lucky for me."

Freddy's jaw clenched, then his eyes blazed bright yellow. There was a *whoomph* of inward-rushing air and Kane's hair exploded into flame. He yelled in pain and ran around in circles, frantically beating at his head.

Freddy barked with laughter. "Now *that's* entertainment."

Then he went flying as Kane unleashed a similar volley of firepower at him, blue flames pouring from his outstretched hands, his eyes screwed up in concentration. Freddy swung round to retaliate, but Kane was no longer there. He blinked out of existence, then reappeared upside down on the ceiling next to Freddy. He spread his arms wide like a gunslinger and beckoned to Freddy, his eyes glinting in anticipation.

The battle had begun.

At the other end of the train, in the driver's cab, Henry stood looking down at the control panel in anguish. There was no steering wheel, no foot pedals. Just a big flashing sea of crazy colored lights, like an airplane cockpit. There were no labels, no clue as to what any of the controls did. He'd known that he'd been foolish to hope for a big obvious button marked "Stop," but he was still disappointed not to find one.

A brightly lit station loomed in the front window, then flew by. Henry cracked his knuckles in front of him then reached out, fingers shaking, and pulled a lever at random.

Nothing happened.

Oddly encouraged by this, he pressed a half-dozen other buttons that looked promising, then reached out and took hold of the big lever in the middle of the board. He pulled on it, but it seemed to be stuck. He pulled harder, and myriad flashing red lights suddenly came on over his head. A low beeping sound filled the cab.

"Not good, not good," Henry muttered to himself, flicking a series of switches beside the lever. A flashing light came on, and a little sign lit up above him reading, "Purge toilets Y/N?"

Henry cursed.

Up on the ceiling of the wrecked carriage, Kane stepped back a pace or two, eyeing Freddy. His entire being thrummed with power and he had never felt more alive. The Deathstone in his pocket was heating up, spewing out its stolen power into him, filling him with a wash of crackling energy. He felt incredible, invincible, as though he could do anything. All he had to do was to get the sacrifice over and done with, anoint the Deathstone with blood and Freddy's powers would be his forever.

But first, he needed a new sacrifice.

Kane glanced down at the three teenagers huddled at the back of the carriage and smiled to himself. Jacob had already fulfilled his purpose, as far as he was concerned, but he might be able to find some use for him in the future.

The two girls, on the other hand, would do nicely. Maybe if he sacrificed them both, he'd get double the power?

It was going to be fun finding out.

But first, he had to get Freddy out of his face. The freak was semi-transparent and Kane knew this meant his power was on the fritz.

All the more for him.

Kane grinned and gave a jerk of his head. A ring of ghostly flames sprang up around Freddy, trapping him. Freddy shielded his face from the roaring heat, then blinked hard, directing a spray of invisible water at them.

The flames went out.

"Hmm." Kane chewed on his bottom lip, contemplating, then his eyes lit up. He raised his hand in front of him and a jet of molten tar shot out, smacked into Freddy and knocked him down. Freddy howled in pain as the hot tar rapidly solidified, trapping him. He nodded quickly and a wave of crackling hoarfrost spread out from him, turning the tar to black ice. His fingerknives started glowing. Within seconds they had turned red hot and melted through the ice. Freddy ripped his arm free with a roar and raised it high into the air.

His fingerknives liquified and reformed into a giant hammer, which he brought down onto the ice.

It shattered into a million fragments, freeing him.

Freddy stood up, cackling triumphantly. "Is that all you got?"

Kane quickly raised a hand, but he wasn't quick enough. Freddy gave a flick of his leather-clad wrist and there was a tearing sound as dozens of antidrug posters pulled themselves off the walls of the carriage. They spun through the air, folding themselves into a flock of origami paper birds, which flew at Kane, attacking him with beating wings and snapping paper teeth. He yelled in pain as his exposed skin was torn up in hundreds of tiny paper cuts, then his eyes widened as he saw what Freddy was holding.

"Oh, you've gotta be kidding me!" he exclaimed, then ducked as a giant, six foot high lemon flew overhead, splattering into the end wall and exploding in a shower of juice. Kane yelped in pain as its acidity splattered over him, washing into his cuts.

Freddy smiled evilly. "Oooh—that's gotta sting," he said.

Kane quickly waved a mini thundercloud into existence and washed the burning liquid off, then turned to Freddy, enraged. "You're gonna pay for that!" he cried. A howling wind sprang up, knocking Freddy off his feet. Kane stalked toward him, eyeing Freddy's fingerknives. As he walked, a rush of silver flooded up his arm, crystallizing into the shape of five knives, just like Freddy's. "Ready to die?" he said.

Freddy just shook his head in amusement. He raised his own arm, smirking, his eyes dark with malice. *Kerchak!* His razor-sharp fingerknives extended one at a time, shooting outwards until they were each three feet long. The points extended, turning a glassy black color, until they were so thin and sharp they were practically invisible. The air hummed and Kane felt his power being sucked out of him as Freddy drew energy from the very air, becoming solid once again.

Freddy swung his hand backward, moving faster than the eye could follow and a thunderclap sounded as the tips of his knives sliced the very air open.

Whhhhhhhhhuuuuuuuuuummmmmmmmm...

Kane gulped.

Freddy raised an eyebrow then spun around and sliced an eight foot section out of the roof of the carriage. Stars and rushing treetops were revealed through the gaping hole. Under Krueger's evil gaze, the section of roof shattered into a thousand fragments, hung in the air for a moment, then zipped toward Kane like a thousand deadly needles, aiming to rip him to shreds.

With a cry, Kane threw up his hands and flung a powerful wave of magnetism at Freddy. The roof fragments paused inches from him, reversed their direction like compass needles and went flying back toward an unprepared Freddy, skewering him like a pincushion. Freddy shrieked in pain and surprise, then yelped as the metal of his extended fingerknives was caught by the magnetism, dragging him down to his knees as they thunked into the metal of the carriage roof.

For a brief moment, he was trapped.

Kane advanced on him, grinning humorlessly. His own fingerknives flickered and morphed in quick succession into a sword, then a bandsaw, then a chainsaw. The saw started to buzz, sparks flying out of the razor-sharp chain. Stepping back, he wielded the saw and swung it sharply downward, toward Freddy's exposed head.

Down on the floor, Jacob turned to Ella. "Uh, I think this would be a good time to leave."

Ella was bending over Jen's comatose form, checking her pulse. "You think?" she said, wiping blood off her hands. "Jen's out cold. You think we can get her out past those guys without them noticing?"

Jacob glanced up at the two titans battling on the ceiling. "Sure," he said. "You remember to pack that Uzi?"

Up on the ceiling, Krueger's eyes widened as he saw Kane's chainsaw whirring down toward his face at high speed. He quickly ripped his hand free of his glove, then lunged to one side as the chainsaw buried itself in the roof. As Kane fought to free himself,

Freddy stood up on the ceiling, dusting himself off. With a snap of his fingers a new glove formed on his hand, the old one bursting into blue flame and vanishing in a puff of sulphuric smoke.

Kane tugged himself free, and the two killers stood and stared at one another. Kane's expression was blank, determined, while Krueger's yellow eyes shone with anticipation.

They both moved at once. Krueger struck out with his fingerknives at superhuman speed, aiming to sever Kane's head, but Kane dodged aside at the very last second, his reactions still sluggish from his injuries. More by accident than intent, he brought his whirring chainsaw hand up to lock with Freddy's knives in a blaze of blue sparks.

Metal screamed, then crunched, and Freddy howled in pain as one of his fingerknives was wrenched off by the whirling chain and flung across the room, burying itself in the door control hatch.

With a polite ring of the bell the carriage door hissed open. Howling wind flooded the car, whipping debris up into the air and sending Kane tumbling off the ceiling. His chainsaw buried itself deeply in the floor, halting the blade. One moment later the internal mechanism blew up with a bang.

Quick as a snake, Freddy blinked out of existence then reappeared next to Kane. With a casual swing of his three remaining lethal blades, he deftly lopped Kane's arm off. Bone crunched and the severed limb fell to the floor, spurting blood.

"Gotcha," Freddy said with a grin.

Kane screamed.

SEVENTEEN

"Jen? Jen! Wake up!"

Jen stirred, groaning, eyes tight shut. She rolled over, irritably shielding her face from the light, trying to find a more comfortable position. Her head was pounding with a relentless, throbbing pain and she felt like someone had just beaten the hell out of her legs with a rubber mallet.

This was one bitch of a hangover. And on a school night, too.

She never learned.

And she'd had the worst dream. First she'd ruined her brand new Prada sweatshirt in a muddy puddle, then some guy with knives for fingers had been chasing her, and then she was trapped with him on a driverless train with two cute but mentally unstable boys and a girl from her class with questionable fashion sense.

What a nightmare.

Someone shook her by the shoulders, more urgently this time. Jen frowned beneath closed eyelids. "Leave me alone," she said indistinctly. "I don't wanna go to school!"

"She's delirious," said a voice. "That was a nasty bump on the head."

"We have to move her. If Freddy wins, we're toast."

Freddy?

Oh no...

A sickening feeling filled her. Jen opened one eye, then the other. She looked around her. Then she closed them, groaning again and curling into a fetal ball.

At the other end of the carriage, Kane lay on the floor in a pool of his own blood, clutching at the stump of his arm while warm blood flooded through his fingers. Hot pain stabbed through him, but he fought to stay conscious, knowing that if he let himself black out he would quite likely bleed to death, right there on the floor.

A booted foot filled his field of vision and he quickly looked up, his face the color of ash.

Freddy towered over him, a sneer on his thin lips as he stood amid the ruins of the trashed train carriage. Flying debris swirled around him as the wind scoured the car. With a playful whoop, Freddy lashed out with his gloved hand, slicing a thick metal support pole in two in a spray of sparks. The pole started to topple and Freddy expertly caught it in mid-air, flipped it around and spun it in an interweaving pattern. He looked down at Kane, as though he were a cockroach he was preparing to crush. "Any last words?"

"Two," Kane wheezed. "Fuck you."

"Well said." Freddy grinned through rotten teeth and raised the broken pole, preparing to skewer him. Kane quickly let go of his stump and waved his other hand weakly, muttering under his breath like a bad magician.

Freddy froze, his pole raised, eyes flickering left and right. Nothing seemed to have happened. He relaxed and tried to take a step forward, then hesitated in mid-stride. His gaze moved downward and he stared at himself in disbelief. His legs were coated in thick plastic, his pants solidified and covered in paint. His joints seemed to have fused together. His head spun sideways and he stared at himself in the crazed reflection of the shattered window. His jaw dropped.

He had turned into a giant action figure.

Freddy took a step forward, his joints sticking unpredictably, and stopped, unable to bend his own knees. He reached up to remove his hat, so he could scratch his head. It was stuck down with superglue. In a fury, he lashed out at Kane, but his floppy plastic fingerknives bent backward on contact, raising red welts on Kane's cheek rather than slicing his face off.

Denied the kill, Freddy threw back his head and howled in frustration.

Kane rolled over desperately, fighting the pain of his severed arm and struggled to get to his feet. His legs shook and slid out from under him as the shock hit, but he kept trying. He couldn't let Krueger kill him. Not now. Not when he was so close to achieving

everything he'd worked for. He had some of Freddy's dream-powers, but he was still human. That meant he could be hurt, or killed.

But Freddy was already dead. He didn't have that problem.

A wave of nausea buzzed through Kane at the thought. He shook his head, fighting to clear it, then clutched hold of the nearest seat and pulled himself to his feet, leaning heavily on the broken support pole. He reached into his pocket for the Deathstone, the world blurring and spinning in front of his eyes. He had to complete his ritual before he lost too much more blood, or it would be all for nothing.

In front of him, Freddy was busy morphing back to his original shape, the plastic evaporating off of him in clouds of foul smelling steam. Within seconds, he would be lethal again. "Jacob!" Kane cried desperately.

At the other end of the carriage, Jacob looked up.

"Help me!" Kane cried.

Jacob's gaze flicked to Freddy, who was nearly free. He jumped to his feet and raced over to his fallen mentor, winding his way around the scattered debris and torn seats. As Freddy advanced on them both, Jacob stood over Kane protectively, his wildly tangled hair streaming out behind him in the wind. He screwed up his eyes in concentration, fixing his gaze firmly on Freddy. The lights flickered and a small cloud of white energy appeared over Jacob's head.

Then it sputtered and went out.

Jacob tried again, with similar results. "I can't!" he yelled, over the rising wind. "He doesn't dream!"

"Everybody dreams," snapped Kane. "Keep trying!"

"Time's up, scum," shouted Freddy. He tried to move toward Kane, then stopped and looked down. His feet were stuck to the floor with melted plastic. He muttered a curse and yanked on his leg, trying to pull it free.

While Freddy was occupied, Kane quickly pressed the Deathstone into Jacob's hand, along with a frayed piece of parchment and pointed a shaking finger back along the carriage at Ella. "Change of plan," he gasped. "You have to finish the ritual."

"What!" Jacob stared at Kane.

"It's our only chance! Kill the girl, anoint the stone with her blood and read these words out loud. It's the only way..."

"I'm not killing Ella!" said Jacob.

Kane shook his head irritably, then grunted with pain. "You can kill either girl, it doesn't matter. Quickly! Or he'll—kill us all!"

"But—"

"Take my gun. She won't feel a thing."

"Kane, I'm not leaving you,"

"Go! Now!" Kane bellowed.

Jacob quickly pocketed the pistol Kane had slipped him and danced backward out of reach. Moments later, Freddy freed himself and turned to Kane, leering.

"Jacob, get away from him!" cried Ella.

Jacob was only too happy to oblige. As Freddy closed in on Kane, he tore toward Ella and bent down, helping her lift the concussed Jen up into a sitting position. There was a large, rapidly swelling lump on her forehead. "We gotta go. Get up!"

Jen reeled, clutching at Jacob's arm. "Can I go home now?" she asked.

"You'll have to wait, honey," said Ella. "We've got a train to stop."

Jacob looked down at Ella, his expression unreadable. "You go. Help that friend of yours."

"And leave you two here? Are you kidding?"

"I'll look after her," said Jacob, staring down at Jen.

A howl came from the other end of the carriage. Jacob looked up to see Freddy bent over the broken body of Kane, wiping his blades on his sweater. Blood poured down Kane's shirt, but he was still moving weakly, trying to fend Freddy off.

Freddy had cut Kane's throat.

"Kane!"

Jacob ran forward, but a wall of flame sprang up, blocking his path. He stared through the flames, powerless to do anything but watch as Freddy closed in on his caseworker.

Behind the flames, Kane made one feeble gesture and a swarm of ghostly killer bees materialized in the air. They swooped down on Freddy, buzzing madly. Freddy waved his knife-glove impatiently

and they turned to glass, clattering to the floor as they buzzed in furious circles, like bee-shaped spinning tops. Another wave of Kane's hand produced a spinning firebolt, but Freddy easily dodged it. It struck the seats behind him, turning the chairs to sugar and the upholstery to a singed tartan pattern. There was a sticky burp and the seats exploded, showering the carriage with goo.

Giving up, Kane's form flickered as he tried to dematerialize, but he didn't have the strength. He slumped back to the carriage floor, exhausted.

Freddy looked down at the stricken Kane and smiled, showing rotten yellow teeth. "You want to know the difference between you and me?" he growled. "I *need* to kill. You just want to kill. That's why I'll always win."

"Go to hell," whispered Kane, blood seeping through his lips.

"Gladly," said Freddy. Then he held up a finger. "Oh! I've got a good one!" He gave a flourish of his hand and vanished in a puff of orange smoke. A moment later the flames in the carriage died away, thick black smoke rolling up from the charred seats.

"Jacob," gasped Kane.

Jacob ran down the carriage, falling to his knees in front of Kane. The prone form seized hold of Jacob's shirt, the light rapidly fading from his eyes. "Kill... the girl," he whispered, blood seeping from between his lips. "It's the only way to stop him. I know you can do it."

"Kane, listen to me," said Jacob, his voice thick with emotion. Then he stopped, glancing up in fear as a strange sound filled the room. It was Freddy's voice, singing a cheery song and it seemed to be getting louder, as though he were falling from a great height.

"Do me proud, kid," whispered Kane. Then he threw back his head and screamed as knives burst out of his wrists, his elbows, his knees. Jacob jumped to his feet and backed away in horror as Kane's body split open, tearing itself apart from neck to groin. Green and red fabric was visible inside the gory, glistening depths of his viscera. Then his body tore itself in two and Freddy burst out from inside him, shedding his skin like a wetsuit.

The demonic killer wiped the blood off his forehead, then reached down into the shuddering mess of gleaming organs and pulled out

his hat, fanning himself with it. "Whew! Do not go in there!" he said. He popped the hat back on his head, then studied the steaming corpse for a moment. "I kinda liked him. Shame he had to split."

Freddy stepped over the butchered remains of Kane, the blood flowing off him in rivers. He pointed a finger at Jacob, his expression turning deadly serious. "I want a word with you," he growled. At either end of the carriage the doors twisted themselves shut, the ceiling bowing down to meet the floor in a shriek of tortured metal.

Jacob rose to his feet, dizzy with fear.

There was nowhere left to run.

Freddy bore down on the three teenagers huddled at the other end of the carriage, grinning like a skull. "Time to die, kiddies!"

He stalked toward them down the ruined carriageway, windows and lights blowing out as he passed them—*boom-boom-boom*—plunging the carriage into semi-darkness. Wind and broken glass screamed into the carriage like an indoor hurricane, revealed like flash frames in the flickering light. Freddy flung out his arms dramatically and a second glove materialized on his other hand. He raked both sets of claws down the side of the carriage as he closed in on the teens, curtains of orange sparks pouring down and fizzing on the metal floor.

Screeeeeeeeeeccchhhh!

Screeeeeeeeeeccchhhh!

A twin scream of metallic death, their pitch intertwining in a complex and ear-splitting harmonic of pain. Freddy laughed in delight at the sound.

Jacob, Ella and Jen shrank back, staring up at Freddy in terror.

This was it. This was the end.

As Freddy approached, Jacob's fingers stole inside his jacket and closed on the cold shape of the gun. It would be useless against Freddy, he knew. There was only one thing left to do. He numbly clicked off the safety catch, Kane's voice ringing in his head. *Kill the girl—it's the only way...*

He was out of time. He had to complete the ritual.

But who to kill.

Jacob clenched his teeth in an agony of indecision, trying to force himself to be logical about this. His gaze flicked sideways at Ella, then Jen, while he measured them up in his head.

Two lives.

Two human beings.

Both healthy and strong.

Both young, with their whole lives ahead of them.

But Ella was much cuter than her friend.

Jacob realized with a shock that he'd already made the decision to end a life. It would save four other lives, including his own, but, now that the moment was upon him, he found himself repulsed by the pettiness of his reasoning.

If only there was another way.

As Freddy closed in on them, swiping aside an entire rack of broken seats with a vicious sweep of his arm, Jacob tensed. He had to decide, and if he made the wrong decision they would all die.

He had to kill.

But he wasn't a killer.

He wasn't like Freddy—or was he?

What made him different?

A sudden thought struck Jacob, with the icy clarity of logic. He froze, then let out his breath in a sigh that contained every ounce of pain, fear and frustration from the last five years.

He knew how to make things right.

But he had to move quickly before he changed his mind.

Pulling the Deathstone and the fragment of parchment out of his pocket with fumbling fingers, he quickly read the incantation aloud. He pressed the Deathstone against his right temple.

Then he pulled out the gun and aimed it at the other side of his head.

Jacob looked up into the hell-colored eyes of Freddy Krueger and made his decision.

Back in the driver's cab, Henry had finally located a two-way radio. It was an ancient model, but it worked. He was busy relating their sorry situation to the operator on the other end, his gaze fixed on the front window as the urban landscape sped by. Overhead he heard the thump of rotors, barely audible over the howling of wind through the train, as a police helicopter tracked them, its searchlight fixed on the train.

"And then this madman killed the driver, and now we're all going to die!"

"We diverted all other trains on the line," crackled the radio.

"Way to go!"

"But the line terminates at the next station. You need to stop the train."

"That's what I've been trying to tell you! I don't know how!" Henry thumped the control panel in frustration. There was a click and a hum, and the train's windshield wipers started up. "Oh, that's very helpful!" he shouted at the controls. He turned back to the radio. "Can't you do *anything* from your end?"

"We've been trying. We're locked out. Something is jamming the frequency. You'll need to manually override the controls."

"How?"

"See that big lever in front of you? Grab it and pull. When the train's slowed down enough, apply the brake,"

"Okay. I can do this," said Henry. He rubbed his hands together and reached out toward the lever.

Which suddenly blurred and became a deadly brown cobra.

"Oh, you have *got* to be kidding!" Henry stared at the creature in disbelief. It puffed up its hood and hissed at him menacingly. Without taking his eyes off the snake, Henry picked up the radio and pressed the send button. "Um, Houston, we have a problem," he said.

Blamm!

The gun went off, deafeningly loud, making everything metallic in the car ring with the aftershock. Jacob pitched forward and hit the

ground hard.

For a moment he lay there, face down on the cold floor, stunned. Everything was quiet save a high-pitched shriek in his left ear. He felt blood start to flow in a hot trickle and after a moment of disorientation he reached up a shaking finger to touch it.

It was coming from his ear, not, as he had dreaded, a large hole in his head.

He was still alive.

For now.

Pain flooded through him and Jacob winced as his ribs started to throb. Just a second before he had squeezed the trigger, something had hit him in the back, sledgehammer—hard, knocking him to the ground and sending the bullet zipping wide over his head.

Bemused, Jacob looked down.

Jen was lying on the floor next to him, unmoving, clutching at her neck with limp fingers. Blood rushed out, forming a small but rapidly growing puddle beside her.

The way she lay there, it was quite apparent that she was dead.

Ella stood beside her, shocked.

Before he could even begin to process what had happened, Jacob felt cold hands seize hold of him. He was hoisted aloft by a very real, very pissed Krueger. "You think you can escape me that easily, you little brat?" roared Krueger. *Wham!* He dealt Jacob a stinging blow to the side of his head. "*That's* for the last month," he said. Jacob struggled against Krueger's death grip as blood started to flow from his nose. It was like being held in a truck crusher.

"And *this* is for eternity." Freddy drew back his hand again, aiming his knives at the throat, ready to strike.

As he did so, Jacob saw a very familiar, faraway look in his eyes. Realization hit him in a flash.

Freddy *did* dream!

And this was what he dreamed about: the kill.

And that meant that he had a chance...

Scarcely daring to hope, Jacob locked eyes with his killer and concentrated. As Freddy reared back, his fingerknives flickering out toward his throat, there was a rushing sound and a roar of light.

And then, quite suddenly, Jacob was inside Freddy's head.

It was hot in there. Flames flickered, people screamed, animals shrieked. Heat shimmered in the air, giving everything a hallucinatory look. There was a strong smell of burning flesh and the sound of running footsteps.

It was a personal version of hell, in microcosm.

And then there was the fear. Much fear.

Jacob couldn't see it, but he could feel it. It was everywhere, all pervading, all consuming and it clung to him like lead weights on a drowning man. He struggled to shake it off, but the harder he tried, the more powerful the feeling became, until it was almost overwhelming. His chest filled with panic and his lungs felt like they were about to burst.

You couldn't run from fear.

Jacob struck out blindly at the empty air, reeling as he felt the fear ripping his mind open and pouring a tidal flood of strange, brutal memories into his head. They assaulted him in a frantic blur of colors, pictures and sounds.

Freddy, aged eleven, curled up under the bed, sobbing his heart out as his drunken stepfather stalked around the house with a baseball bat, smashing furniture, shelves, light fittings, screaming things at his stepmother that no eleven-year-old should hear.

Freddy, aged twelve, running blindly down a darkened alleyway, the black shape of his stepdad stalking along behind him, a broken whisky bottle dangling from one hand. "You're not sorry, you little shit? So help me God, I'll *make* you sorry!"

Freddy, aged thirteen, pulling the feathers off the still living bird that one of the cats had brought in, before tossing it into the garbage disposal and hitting the crusher button, shrieking in fear and delight as blood fountained up across the ceiling.

Freddy, aged fourteen, stoically taking yet another beating from his dad's metal tipped belt. "Thank you, sir. Can I have another?"

Freddy aged fifteen, carving deep and intricate patterns into the flesh of his own chest with a straight razor, staring at himself in the mirror as he worked. "You want to know the secret of pain? If you just stop feeling it, you can start using it."

Freddy, aged sixteen, lying on his back on bloodstained sheets and laughing insanely as a girl ran naked and screaming from the bedroom.

Freddy, aged seventeen, buying himself a new sweater with his first wage check from his school janitor job, as his stepfather's twisted, butchered remains burned away to nothing, deep in the heart of the school's boiler room.

Freddy, aged twenty-five, stalking his first victim—such a pretty little girl—through the maze of the power-plant's innards. The screams, the fear—the power! Finally, *he* was the one in control!

There was a zipping, hissing sound, like steam flying backward into a kettle, and Jacob found that he too was suddenly running, his legs blurring beneath him, his white cotton dress flying around him as he ran. Behind him came the heavy footfalls of the nasty man with the glove—the bad glove—the one with all the sharp, pointy knives stuck in it...

He rounded the corner, his blonde pigtails flying as he sobbed hysterically for his mother—and ran smack bang into the bad man.

He shrieked in crazed terror.

The man's hand snapped out and grabbed Jacob by the throat, then lifted him off the ground, staring at him with cold, dead eyes. His grip was wet and slimy, and his skin was writhing with worms. "Jacob!" he cried, his voice coming from everywhere at once. "I know you're in there!"

Jacob screamed, and a moment later the bad man's body flew apart in a squirming shower of maggots. Jacob fell to the ground, curling into a fetal ball and wrapping his hands round his head while the fear surged up into his throat like bile, choking him, paralyzing him.

But he couldn't let the fear win. He was better than that, stronger than that.

Jacob took a deep breath, fighting down the terror that lurked within him like poison, crushing the fear with his iron self-control.

And when he looked up, the boiler room had vanished.

He took a few calming breaths, then uncurled and shakily rose to his feet, looking around apprehensively.

He was in a vast underground cavern. Steam hissed and there was a smell of death in the air. Jacob started around him and gave a gasp of shock.

The cavern stretched to infinity. Thousands of transparent doors lined the walls, each one revealing a view of people dying in a thousand unspeakably agonizing ways. Mutilated bodies were nailed to the walls, naked and struggling, while molten tar dripped, saws buzzed, people screamed.

"Welcome to my world, kid."

Jacob jumped and spun around. Freddy was standing behind him. He spread his arms in a gesture of generosity, his manic expression for once subdued, almost serene. "Like what I've done with the place?"

Jacob backed away. "Not much."

"Too bad, pipsqueak, you're here for the long haul." Freddy cocked his head to one side, regarding Jacob with interest. "Wanna play a game? It's called 'Pick Your Fate'."

"My what?"

"Your fate, jackass. Pick one." Freddy gestured up at the packed walls, at the seething mass of tormented humanity writhing in their own individual hells. He grinned. "That's just for starters. We have the rest of eternity to get to know each other. Father to son."

"You're not my father," Jacob shouted.

Freddy *tsked* impatiently, then gave a wave of his hand. Beside him, one of the doors flew open, revealing the figure of a young woman impaled on a burning spike, hanging on a wall. Jacob felt an icy wave of dread pour through him.

No.

It couldn't be.

He peered closer.

It was his mother.

She was still alive, an ivory spike of bone punching through her back and emerging through the bloody mess of her chest. Her skin was mottled and drenched in blood and a tide of black ants crawled ceaselessly over her in a living carpet, chewing busily away at her flesh. Her eyes were wide open, staring sightlessly at the ceiling.

Freddy clasped a hand on Jacob's shoulder as he stared, speechless with shock. "I told her when I killed her that I'd take good care of her little boy." Freddy gave a short, ugly laugh. "I'll do the same for you, when you're dead. Nothing's too good for my special little friend."

"You bastard!" Jacob swung round, fists at the ready, but Freddy was no longer there. He vanished with a snort of laughter and a crackle of light. Jacob looked around wildly and saw Freddy blink back into being beside one of the doors. The lights in the cavern died and a bank of spotlights hit the door. Jacob saw that his own name was emblazoned across the door in burning letters.

He shrank away from it, appalled.

"Choose a fate, kid!" Freddy cried, his voice echoing through the cavern. All around him, the heads of his victims swiveled to watch, staring at Jacob with bloody eyes. A giant spectral clock appeared over his head and the minutes started ticking down. "You got ten seconds."

"Screw you!"

"Eight seconds." Freddy started humming a dirge. "Give it up. You're already dead. Or you will be, in seven seconds."

Jacob stared at the broken, bloody mess of his mother and closed his eyes. There was only one thing left to do, though he really, really didn't want to do it.

But he had nothing to lose. Either way, he would be dead.

Concentrating intently, he rallied the last of his powers.

Then, he released his hold over the townsfolk's dreams.

Blam! Blam! Blam! The doors all around the cavern blew open and scorching white light poured out as the town's fifteen thousand residents began dreaming again. Screams filled the air, far off and metallic sounding.

Freddy was distracted for two seconds, at most.

In that time, Jacob summoned the very last scrap of his borrowed dream powers and poured eighteen years of hatred and fury into Freddy's mind.

Then, he visualized a fate for him.

Back in the train, Ella and Jen dropped to the ground, shrieking, hands thrown up to ward off invisible terrors. Light spilled into their eyes and mouths, as dream energy swirled around them, assaulting them in a colorful blur of light and sound. Above them, the cop helicopter tailing the train slewed wildly to one side as an explosion of light beamed out of every window.

Inside the carriage, Freddy and Jacob stood frozen, enveloped in a shimmering heat haze, as though time itself had stopped. Krueger's hand moved forward, infinitesimally slowly, creeping toward Jacob's jugular.

In Freddy's head, Jacob fell to his knees, exhausted. He looked up with dimming eyes and gasped with relief.

It had worked!

Every door in the cavern hung wide open and in every doorway, Freddy had taken the place of each of his victims. Their souls streamed out of the doors in a tsunami-like wave of bluish white light, vanishing into the walls and roof. A thousand ungodly shrieks filled the room as Freddy was hung, impaled, burned, electrocuted, dying a thousand times over in every way imaginable, all in one moment.

This was Freddy's worst nightmare come true and there wasn't a thing he could do about it.

Jacob punched the air triumphantly. "See how you like it, you son of a bitch!"

Moments later, the cavern shook, flooding with a deathly red light. Jacob looked around him in alarm. If Freddy was dying with Jacob

inside his mind, he had a very strong feeling that it would be the end of him as well.

Time to go.

He staggered to his feet, bone weary, and began running back to the doorway to where his mother was imprisoned, hanging. He couldn't leave without making sure that she was free, like the rest of the tormented souls in Freddy's twisted world. She might be already dead, but he couldn't bear the thought of her suffering any further. Bitter tears ran down his face at the thought of everything she had already gone through.

If only he'd known.

Jacob skidded to a halt beside the door and peered feverishly inside, but his mother had gone.

And in her place...

A burning and extremely pissed Freddy hung on the flaming spike, his black skin carpeted in biting ants. Seeing Jacob, Freddy's nostrils flared and his fists clenched in hatred. He reared up on the spike with a furious howl of rage, the ants falling away to reveal his pitted, chewed flesh.

"*JACOB!*" Krueger screamed.

Crrrr-aaa-aacckkk! The spike splinted under his weight, snapping in half with a sound like a gunshot. Freddy hit the ground with a thud, then pushed himself up and began crawling toward Jacob.

Jacob shrank from the appalling sight, then turned and fled, his bare feet slapping on the floor as he put as much distance between himself and Freddy as possible.

He passed the door of his own designated fate. It was hanging open, so he couldn't resist sneaking just a little peek inside. It was filled with a milky white light, its depths dwindling to vanishing point. There was nothing that seemed dangerous in there, so Jacob hung back, as the screams from the cavern behind him grew louder.

Freddy had told him to choose his own fate, but there was nothing inside the door. Could it be his way out?

A sharp pain shot up his leg. Jacob yelped in pain and panic. He stared downward to see the battered form of Freddy clinging to him, reaching out one flaming, insect-covered hand.

"Look what you've done to me!" Freddy shouted, his face bestial with insane rage. His eyes were spinning black holes in his face and flames belched out of his mouth as he spoke. "You're gonna pay for this!"

With a shudder of revulsion, Jacob drove his heel downward into Freddy's hideous face, shattering his nose and sending blood spraying across the floor at his feet. Freddy let go with a howl, pitching backward onto the floor, and exploded in a shower of blood and crawling black insects that coalesced upward in a spinning black spiral, howling like the spirits of the dead.

A loud wail rose from behind him. Turning, Jacob saw that the entire cavern was filled with copies of Freddy, each one more mutilated and twisted than the next. More were jumping down from the walls as they used their preternatural strength to free themselves from the doorways of their fates. They started to close in on him, growling and screaming, their fingerknives a weaving forest of silver death.

Well, that takes care of that decision, Jacob thought.

He started toward his own door, then shrank back as a roaring wall of flame suddenly sprang up, blocking his path.

Jacob hesitated, then, as the shouting voices behind him grew louder, he hardened his resolve and ran toward the open doorway as fast as he could.

Bolstering up his nerve, Jacob leapt into the flames.

EPILOGUE

Jacob woke up to the smell of fresh coffee brewing. The delicious scent crept into his nostrils and roused his sleepy brain, bringing with it the promise of breakfast and a morning shower. He felt warm and woozy, and his throat was dry from sleep. He licked his lips and coughed lightly, nestling his sleepy head deeper into the soft, fragrant smelling pillow.

The start of yet another day at Westin Hills.

Great.

His head felt fuzzy, as though the inside of his brain was stuffed with scratchy straw. He put it down to whatever drugs the supervisor had pumped him full of last night. He never knew what new experimental chemical he was going to get and some mornings he was relieved to wake up at all.

But last night. What the hell had happened last night?

The thought lurked in the back of his brain, nagging at him.

Jacob frowned sleepily, and then tried to roll over.

He couldn't move.

Oh, that one was never good.

Tentatively, he opened his eyes. The white ceiling above him swam into focus, the blades of a brushed steel fan turning lazily.

Squeak-squeak-squeak.

Jacob's eyes tracked downward. He was in what looked like a hospital room. A gurney sat at the end of his bed and by his side a cardio-monitor beeped reassuringly. There was a big basket of fruit beside him, a bunch of slightly wilting yellow flowers in a vase on the windowsill. A big black folder hung from the end of his bed.

Jacob stared at it, fighting down panic. He had no memory of how he had got here. What the hell had happened to him? Why was he in hospital?

Hardly daring to look, Jacob peeped down at himself. Almost every inch of him was swathed in mummy-like rolls of white bandages. There was a two-inch gap on the inside of his right wrist, where an IV drip was taped to a vein in his arm. The flesh beneath was burned to

a crisp, leaking clear fluids into the hospital sheets, but somehow he felt no pain. His eyes followed the snaking line of the IV tubing and he saw a morphine drip, feeding him elephant-strength painkillers. With each movement, a burning, queasy feeling stabbed through him that made it very clear that, the moment that drip was unhooked, he wasn't going to get any sleep in a long, long time.

Given the circumstances, perhaps this wouldn't be such a bad thing.

The sensation of burning unlocked a door in his mind and memory hit him like a sledgehammer blow to the temple.

Freddy... The train... The blood... The Deathstone... Kane... His mother...

Jacob's heart started pounding uncontrollably and he struggled to sit up in the bed, but couldn't move an inch. What had happened to him? Had he beaten Freddy? And what about Ella? Did she make it, or was she dead too?

His heart-rate monitor sped up as panic washed through him and after a moment a nurse in a pale green uniform poked her head through the door at the sound, then broke into a wide smile. "He's awake!" she called.

The door banged closed, then was pushed open again as Ella walked into the room, followed a moment later by Henry.

Jacob sagged in relief, flopping back onto the pillow. Ella looked pale and anxious, in contrast to Henry, who swaggered in like he owned the place. He plopped himself down on a chair by the bed, then started reading through Jacob's patient files, a look of interest on his face. Both his hands were bandaged. "Hospitals suck," he announced to no one in particular. "They make me miss *South Park*."

Ella walked over to Jacob's bed and gazed down at him. "Hey," she said, almost shyly. She was wearing a pink sweater and artfully ripped blue jeans, and looked like she had spent a long time doing her makeup. There was a healing yellow bruise on one cheek. "Welcome back to the world. They didn't think you were going to make it."

"Yeah, well." Jacob's voice was a rusty croak, only just audible. "Takes more than an undead maniacal serial killer to get me down."

He tried to smile, wincing as his burned lips cracked. "Most days, that is."

Ella smiled back at him. Her expression turned serious as she leaned in close. "He's definitely dead, right?" she whispered, throwing a worried glance up at the security camera blinking red in the corner of the room.

"You tell me. What did you see?"

"He was... he was just about to stab you, then he just—vanished. Blinked out of existence. As though he were never there in the first place. Then you burst into flames. It was horrible." Ella smoothed down the blanket beneath her, staring at the coverlet as she replayed the scene in her mind. "If it hadn't been for that fire extinguisher, I don't think you would've made it this far."

"So I owe you my life."

Ella waved a hand dismissively. "We'll just call it even. Although," she looked up and her eyes met Jacob's, with a hint of a challenge, "when you get out of here you're buying me a drink."

"I am?"

"You are. I'm very traumatized by all this, you know. I'm going to be having bad dreams for a month."

"So, you're dreaming again?"

"Oh my God! You would not believe how many dreams I've had this week. And they're all so vivid! Yesterday I had this one dream where leprechauns were trying to steal my cheese and then this guy came in on a purple boat wearing a hat made out of scrambled eggs, then he was after my cheese too."

Jacob smiled as she rambled on, watching the way the sunlight hit her face. He thought she was quite beautiful. Then a thought hit him and he quickly sobered up. "Your friend, the brunette," he said, when Ella stopped for air. "Is she—?"

"Dead? Yes." Ella swallowed hard, avoiding Jacob's gaze. "And her name was Jen. She saved you, the silly little bitch. Probably the one selfless thing she's done in her entire life. I have no idea why."

Henry snorted a laugh and Ella glared at him, then back at Jacob. "Sorry. I didn't mean it like that."

"Don't worry about it. I'm really sorry about your friend." Jacob paused. "How did you manage to stop the train?"

"We didn't. The train crashed and we all died," said Henry, his expression deadpan. "You're dreaming this."

"Don't even say things like that," Jacob said with a shudder.

"Yeah, well, when you killed Freddy, the snake turned back into a handle and I stopped the train. All by myself. Kinda. I'm really clever." Henry puffed up his chest, looking for all the world like a dog that wanted to be patted. "I got to ride home in the helicopter and everything, and there was this one real cute lady cop who—"

Jacob frowned. "There was a snake?"

"Dude, don't even go there," said Ella. "He's been trying to explain it to me for days. Just step away from the topic."

"Fine. I'm just glad that you're safe." Jacob turned his attention to Henry, who was buried nose-deep in the fruit basket beside the bed, picking out all the fresh grapes. "Both of you."

"What?" said Henry, stuffing grapes into his mouth. "Oh yeah, whatever."

At that moment the door opened again, and Sheriff Williams walked in. He looked stressed, ill at ease and his usually crisp uniform looked like it hadn't been ironed for days. "Morning, all," he said. His steely gaze locked in on Jacob. "So, tell me. Is it something personal, or do you kids just enjoy making paperwork for everyone you meet?"

Ella's expression turned to one of concern. "What's up? You need our autographs on any more forms?"

"No. Thanks. You've done enough for one week."

Jacob looked guilty. "So," he said. "Exactly how much trouble am I in this time?"

The sheriff was busily browsing through Jacob's patient notes. "None at all. In fact, you're free to go."

"You're kidding me!" Jacob's mouth dropped open.

"Not at all." The sheriff reached up and changed Jacob's IV drip for him. "We looked into this Kane guy, uncovered a paper trail as long as the Mississippi. Seems like he's been messing with all kinds of things an ex-cop shouldn't mess with: fraud, identity theft,

kidnapping. And bribing a whole bunch of high-up people to cover up for him. An investigation is being launched by our own police department. I personally believe everyone involved will be fired."

"Glad to hear it," said Ella. "It's always nice to save the day."

"That's what we're here for." The sheriff gave Ella a small, stiff bow. "Hey, I was wondering whether I could have a word with the patient?"

"Sure."

The sheriff paused. "I mean, alone."

"Oh, right. We'll be outside."

Ella paused, then leaned over Jacob and gave him a quick kiss on his heavily bandaged cheek. Jacob winced, then smiled ruefully. "And they say love hurts."

"Don't get any ideas, now." Ella wagged her finger, then winked at him and walked out of the door. Henry followed her, widening his eyes and giving Jacob an exasperated look, drawing his hand sharply across his throat.

Jacob smiled to himself.

He gave a lazy yawn, fighting the urge to stretch, which he was sure would only bring him more pain. "So, when can I get out of here?"

"Out? The sheriff smiled blandly. "Oh, you can't get out. That's what maximum security wards are for."

"Maximum?" Jacob's smile froze on his face. "But you said—"

"I lied," said the sheriff smoothly. "None of you are leaving. You're too much of a liability."

All the color drained out of Jacob's face. From outside he heard shouting and there was the sound of a brief scuffle that ended with the clink of metal and a door slamming. He stared up at Sheriff Williams, unbelieving, then swung his gaze around the room. For the first time he noticed the bars on the window, the clamps on the side of the bed, the lack of sharp objects or door handles.

The world closed in on him. He turned his pleading eyes on the sheriff. "But... the guys... they did nothing wrong!"

"They know his name," the sheriff said stiffly. "That's enough to bring him back. We can't risk it. Not again."

He tossed Jacob's patient files down onto the end of his bed. "Their parents will be informed that they aided and abetted a known teenage felon, a sociopath with severe mental health problems. I'm sure they'll only be too anxious for their kids to receive the kind of psychiatric rehabilitation they need, courtesy of the world-class team we have up at Westin Hills."

Above them the fan blades creaked, turning slowly and heavily.

Squeak-squeak-squeak.

"You asshole!" Jacob shouted. "You know it was Freddy!"

"Frederick Krueger is dead," said the Sheriff, as though reading from an invisible autocue. Above them, the red light on the security camera blinked, coldly recording them through its dead glass eye. "He died over a decade ago. You're quite clearly suffering from hallucinogenic psychosis brought on by illegal drug usage, a poor upbringing and possible malnutrition in early childhood." He stuffed Jacob's case notes back into his file as the boy stared at him, horrified. "The whole of Springwood Police Department wishes you a safe and speedy recovery. Have a nice day."

With that, the sheriff turned on his heel and strode from the room, locking the door behind him.

Jacob stared at the closed door, then reeled as a strange sense of numbness flooded over him as the new IV drip kicked in. The world blurred and swum before his eyes as he struggled to focus. The IV was blue and had the remains of a small blue pill drifting around at the bottom.

Jacob wound his eyes around frantically and saw a tall jar beside the bed.

The label read: "TranquilX."

Jacob recognized the brand name.

Sleeping pills.

"No!" Jacob's fists clenched. He pulled frantically on the leather restraints that bound him to the bed. He started screaming, yelling for the sheriff, for anyone. His only response was the sound of a metal viewing window sliding firmly shut and the booted footsteps striding away from the door.

Keys jangled and then silence fell over the room.

A moment later there was a loud *whumph!* and ghostly flames sprung up around the bed. The smell of burning flesh filled Jacob's nostrils and then the ward door shivered and melted open.

An endless inferno was revealed, stretching to infinity.

Jacob looked up at the door, and dread rolled over him in a choking black wave. His own name was inscribed above it and he realized that this was the very door he had chosen to jump through.

Into the fire.

And into his very own personal hell.

"Great choice, kid," rasped a very familiar voice. "Now, how about a little father-son time?"

As the raging flames closed in on Jacob, the last thing he heard before drug-induced sleep claimed him was the cackle of maniacal laughter and the sound of metal screeching on metal. He may have saved the day in the real world, but every night, in his dreams, Freddy would have the last laugh.